



Into the Looking Glass: The Mirror of Old Age in Beauvoir and Améry

Ryan Crawford

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXX, No 2 (2022) pp 16-43.

Vol XXX, No 2 (2022)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2022.1023
www.jffp.org



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

Into the Looking Glass

The Mirror of Old Age in Beauvoir and Améry

Ryan Crawford

Webster Vienna Private University

It was not long after the pandemic began that policy makers, public intellectuals and common people alike came to collectively recognize that those who were now most threatened were also those to whom they had otherwise paid so little attention. For while the elderly had long been ignored as individuals, excoriated as a group, and likened at all times to so many drags on national purse, profit and progress, such calculated meanness could not long withstand the fright felt at the sight of an entire generation suddenly promised to annihilation.¹ And so the usual homilies to youthful supremacy did soon become more muted as stock phrases about older people's obsolescence and consequent superfluity came to seem too impolitic to pronounce amidst a natural-historical catastrophe in which the old were everywhere dying off in droves. But because a dream long cultivated in secret will frequently find its advocates foreswearing afterwards their intentions once its consequences have finally been realized, that earlier disdain for the old did quickly give way to self-exonerating expressions of sympathy and frantic provisions undertaken for their safety. Until, that is, so many months of concern turned into so many years of restrictions and it became acceptable to once again identify the old as scapegoats, vent popular frustrations upon them, and bemoan unendingly the losses endured by young people compelled to now sacrifice the time of their lives for the benefit of those resented for having already lived out their own. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that this unprecedented but by no means uncharacteristic situation did not culminate in any corresponding attention paid to older people's contemporary experience of mass death or their far longer, more historically and societally variable plight more generally. In much contemporary social philosophy, unfortunately, the situation was little better. There older people's plight was recorded, their suffering bewailed, but little to no subsequent analysis sought to determine what the old might themselves know about the contemporary world, and how that knowledge might inform social philosophy's attempts at bringing about much-needed social change.

To take up this otherwise neglected line of inquiry, the present essay will consider a previously unexplored episode in the history of social philosophy in which the writers Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Améry first set themselves beside the mirror of old age.² For what one finds throughout the accounts of what each writer saw when peering into the looking glass is not only an exemplary critique of the various orthodoxies constraining popular and scholarly discourses on aging to cliché and commonplace, then as now; even more significant is how Beauvoir and Améry so transform our understanding of old age that the readymade responses of rejection, veneration and disavowal so typical of our regard for the elderly start to appear illegitimate and unnecessary once the aging body is no longer treated as a mere *object* of knowledge, as usual, but as a subject capable of producing knowledge in its own right. In this way, the aging body becomes an organ of insight of a kind otherwise unwitnessed in the history of philosophy, and a medium through which society's idols can be seen in their untruth so as to then transform the conditions perpetuating the elderly's humiliation. For Beauvoir and Améry, however, such untimely knowledge as this cannot be gained by intellectual exercise alone. And will not eventuate in the sort of consolation so often desired either. For both authors, such knowledge requires instead that one first proceed from that lived experience of old age in which numberless indictments and self-indictments do naturally follow as newfound infirmities and pains, humiliations and pressures so compound that body and mind, now combined, become both agent and author of a question insisting throughout their meditations: what, each asks, does the aging body itself know about the present state of society and its possible transformation? That question, as urgent and unusual today as it was in Beauvoir and Améry's day, is also the spur for the present essay.

But to understand how Beauvoir and Améry first arrived at such a question, one has to first identify those more traditional social and philosophical conceptions of old age encountered and undermined once each turned towards the looking glass of old age around the time of their fifty-fifth year. After reconstructing this scene, the present essay will then detail what it was Beauvoir and Améry both saw before that mirror, as well as their resulting reflections and intertextual dialogue, before turning to the ways in which each writer sought to reclaim the experience and knowledge of old age for philosophical insight and contemporary social change.

At a time when intergenerational conflicts have only continued to increase older people's historical ostracism, it is perhaps appropriate to consider again Beauvoir and Améry's conviction that the feelings of aversion, fright and indifference obstructing a proper understanding of the social and existential situation of old age can only be surmounted by first staring them in the face. To do so today will require, as then, that social philosophy abandon its long-held inattention to the subject of aging so as to afterwards stare so long into the looking glass of old age that the elderly's suffering comes

to appear as unnecessary as it is unfortunate, and as cause for the kind of coalitions and experiments that would finally be commensurate with conditions that continue to degrade the lives of young and old alike.³

The Consolation of Philosophy; or its Shame

That aging has long been a problem for philosophy would seem to be evidenced by its prominent place within the so-called western tradition. From ancient Egypt comes the earliest-known written remark on the subject some 4,500 years ago; from the Old Testament, Homeric Greece and Plato's Athens endless testimony to the joys and sorrows of old age. But what still remains the most extensive ancient treatment of aging is to be found in Cicero's *On Old Age* (*Cato Maior de Senectute*) (45/44 BC).⁴ The most *extensive* and, in many respects, also the most *definitive* account, especially if one takes seriously the fact that *De Senectute's* portrayal of old age has so well endured the millennia that every subsequent analysis cannot help but contend with its terms. It is thus all the more important to recall that the dialogue in which Cato the Elder is there engaged is undertaken for the purpose of defending a felicitous notion of old age so far removed from corporeal, societal and philosophical problems as to render those problems insignificant. And, indeed, what is otherwise called the problem of old age is not there considered by Cicero a problem at all, but a situation calling out for a typically philosophical sort of solution. For when the author begins by speaking of the familiar "burden of old age," he then just as quickly goes on to claim that, with the help of a "calm and philosophic[al] mind," one can learn to do as he did and treat old age as what he calls "an easy and a happy state."⁵ That the facts of old age do often contradict such optimism is for Cicero no contradiction at all. For whenever he finds an old person without those qualities said to be characteristic of such an 'easy and happy state' – characterized then as now in terms of authority, wisdom, honor and serenity, and in accord with that dictum according to which those who live well also age well – Cicero will then propose a typically philosophical kind of consolation by arguing that such failings do not belong to the condition of old age as such, but are instead the result of individual failings its sufferers were not philosophical enough to sufficiently correct.

And while Cicero's laudatory account of aging continues to cast a long shadow over all subsequent writing on the subject, there is reason to suspect that such encomiums to a good old age betray a far greater fear than they might otherwise admit. Indeed, for many the situation of the old constitutes instead the kind of "scandal," as Simone de Beauvoir put it, that can only be presented otherwise by subterfuge, omission, avoidance or just plain maliciousness.⁶ For Beauvoir, the idea of a "ripe old age" propagated by Cicero is the kind of mystification whose individual and social consequences are at once an insult to the intelligence and an offense against what every life will eventually come to know. "We harden in some places and rot in others,"

Beauvoir writes of old age, quoting Sainte-Beuve, and adds: “We never ripen.”⁷ Frequently employed, however, to satisfy the most transparent of political ends,⁸ such mystifications as Cicero’s are just as often invoked to naturalize those forms of suffering the ruling ideology enjoins the old to endure with poise, grace and fortitude – no matter their untruth. In this way, as Beauvoir writes, when it is today men who grow old and in the process retain all of the “virtues and the faults of the men they were and still are,” for instance, such older men are for some reason expected to remake themselves in the image society finds most pleasing, “required,” she writes, “to be a standing example of all the virtues.”⁹ “Above all,” she continues, “they are called upon to display serenity: the world asserts that they possess it, and this assertion allows the world to ignore their unhappiness.”¹⁰ But this “idea that old age brings serenity,” Beauvoir replies, is in the final analysis an idea “that must be totally set aside.”¹¹ To understand aging, one would have to first “invalidate consolation,” as Jean Améry writes, and then go on to indict every last example of that “vile dupery” confounding old age with wisdom, tranquility and the like.¹² As mistaken as they are immemorial, such prejudices are only entertained today by those who know nothing about old age, want to know nothing about old age, and who have always confused the different phases of life with what society finds most pleasing. “From classical times,” Beauvoir writes

the adult world has done its best to see mankind’s condition in a hopeful light; it has attributed to ages that are not its own, virtues that they do not possess: innocence to childhood, serenity to old age. It has deliberately chosen to look upon the end of life as a time when all the conflicts that tear it apart are resolved. What is more, this is a convenient illusion: it allows one to suppose, in spite of all the ills and misfortunes that are known to overwhelm them, that the old are happy and that they can be left to their fate.¹³

It is for this reason that Beauvoir will refer to her own book on aging, *La Vieillesse (The Coming of Age)* (1970), as an “anti-*De Senectute*,”¹⁴ for what she had there sought to demonstrate was that the regular dismissal and degradation of the old exemplified so well by Cicero has long since become in its effects tantamount to “the failure of our entire civilization.”¹⁵ And although *The Coming Age* certainly constitutes Beauvoir’s most sustained analysis of the subject, her engagement with the problem was actually an enduring concern throughout the whole of her life.¹⁶ More than twenty years before, *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)* (1949) had already dedicated a fair bit of attention to that subject whose future place in Beauvoir’s work was foreshadowed in the very terms of that book’s now-famous title. *Foreshadowed*, but not yet present; *included*, but only inasmuch as the old’s *exclusion* was recognized without being as yet rectified by its author – so ambivalent is the status of the old in the history of philosophy that their exclusion even marks the work of those as dedicated to their inclusion as Beauvoir. At the same

time, however, a more careful examination of Beauvoir's most famous book's title might also enable us to identify some of the basic contours of this ambivalence, as well as Beauvoir's early and enduring sensitivity to that ambivalence's effects.

To consider Beauvoir's title today is to recognize how the act of counting the sexes once appeared no more difficult than counting one's fingers: man is the first sex, woman the second — so says dogma and superstition, so repeat societies made in their image. But when Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* turned to the situation, not simply of women but of older women, the author was there led to consider the idea that such older women might actually constitute what is called a "third sex" instead.¹⁷ "Not males," as Beauvoir notes, these older women incapable of any longer bearing children are in some sense "no longer females" either.¹⁸ Restricted here to the particulars of physiology, this idea of older women as a 'third sex' outside the bounds of sexed humanity will gain additional resonance when Beauvoir later shows how such aging women no longer occupy any sanctioned role in society at all.¹⁹ Subject as they are to the ravages of time, the crises of biology and the judgment of society, older women like this will have to frequently confront the horror of societies for whom the woman who does not conform to such images is simply no woman at all. And it was precisely this status of older women as a 'third sex,' and of older people more generally as "stand[ing] outside humanity," as Beauvoir would later put it, that continued to occupy Beauvoir's attention as those around her and she herself continued to age.²⁰

In this sense, then, the relative inattention otherwise paid to Beauvoir's analysis of aging within the scholarly literature, and to *The Coming of Age* more generally, should be set against the evidence of Beauvoir's long-term engagement with the problem, her own explicit statement as to that later study's centrality to her larger oeuvre, as well as the recognition that her writings on both 'the second sex' and the 'third sex' issued from the very same sense of injustice, incomprehension and attempt to redress that injustice. For Beauvoir not only speaks of these two studies in terms of their more essential unity — as when she calls *The Coming of Age* "the counterpart of *The Second Sex*" — but also explains her drive to write both books in remarkably similar terms.²¹ The origin myth particular to each is in fact common to both. And that is because each answers a need that will repeat itself throughout Beauvoir's life. To give an account of the origins of *The Second Sex*, for instance, Beauvoir will relate a scene in which she was sitting at a cafe sometime in 1945: "I felt the need to write in my fingertips," she says, "and the taste of the words in my throat, but I didn't know where to start, or what."²² And so she spoke to a friend, and afterwards decided: "In fact, I wanted to write about myself."²³ Soon afterwards she realized that "the first question to come up was: What has it meant to me to be a woman?"²⁴ And from there the work began: "I am a woman, and I wished to throw light upon the woman's lot," she wrote of *The*

Second Sex. And of *The Coming of Age*, something remarkably similar: “I was on the threshold of old age,” she writes, “and I wished to know the bounds and the nature of the aged state.”²⁵ What unites the first, her most famous book, with her second and least appreciated,²⁶ is precisely this need “to understand a state that is my own,” as she would later say, “and to understand it in its implication for mankind as whole.”²⁷ In this sense, each book sought to understand the situation in which Beauvoir, like so many others, often find themselves, as either women or as older people – or both. But to understand this situation, and thereafter bring such experiences to expression, does necessarily also entail, for Beauvoir and social philosophy more generally, that one begin by determining the extent to which one is already made by others so as to then demonstrate how the causes of one’s individual misfortune do not reside upon the surface of the mirror, as is otherwise so clearly the case, but within those infernal social processes that are their condition instead.²⁸

It is for this reason that Beauvoir’s work in social theory should be today understood, like all attempts at today contending with the problem of aging, in terms of that form of ideology critique Beauvoir called “demystification.”²⁹ Demystification, for Beauvoir, meant the work of confronting the sources of universalized unhappiness in order to show how that unhappiness has been for so long prepared. “Doing away with humbug and telling the truth: that is one of the aims I have pursued most stubbornly throughout all my books,” she explained.³⁰ That the truth told about the causes and consequences of this unhappiness will often result in gestures of aversion, empty consolation and frightened disavowal – all that is to be expected. “To fight unhappiness,” Beauvoir writes, “one must first expose it, which means that one must dispel the mystifications behind which it is hidden so that people do not have to think about it. It is because I reject lies and running away,” she continues, “that I am accused of pessimism; but this rejection implies hope – the hope that truth may be of use. And this,” Beauvoir concludes, “is a more optimistic attitude than the choice of indifference, ignorance or sham.”³¹ Because a sham is what so much talk of aging and the old often amounts to, a mystification of reality undone the moment social philosophy resolves to entertain that “tradition of bleak meditation” to which Beauvoir and Améry belong by finally setting itself before the mirror of old age in order to see what that situation actually amounts to.³²

Into the Looking Glass: Simone de Beauvoir

What the mirror reflects back is as much the image of the individual as of society, and it is just as subject to change as is the body whose passage through time transforms it in turn. For Simone de Beauvoir, the mirror of old age had been an object for reflection from the time of her mature adulthood until the

very end of her life, and subject to ever-changing ideas about the image, experience and difficulty of understanding old age.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir first introduced the problem of women's image in society and the process of growing older when noting how the woman "is still relatively young when she loses her erotic attractiveness and the fertility which, in the view of society and in her own, provides the justification of her existence and her opportunity for happiness. With no future, she still has about one half of her adult life to live."³³ And it is at this point, as the body begins to change, that a woman like Beauvoir, more dependent than men, she claims, on what is called their "physiological destiny,"³⁴ first turns to the image seen wrinkling, sagging and pockmarked in the mirror, and realizes that she now has only two options left: she can either identify with the person she sees in the mirror and set out upon a furious battle to "prolong her dying youth"³⁵ with the aid of hair dye, skin treatments and plastic surgery; or she can refuse what she sees there, telling herself "this cannot be I," not me is "this old woman reflected in the mirror," and begin to thereby devalue the reality she sees before her by taking flight into the many fancies revealed by an inner eye said to know how all mirrors lie, and in search of that new life offered by charlatans of the occult, religion and other miracles.³⁶ Both responses are of course only two ways of refusing to grow old, and are both inspired by what Beauvoir calls the anguish felt "at the throat of the woman whose life is already done before death has taken her."³⁷

And this despite the fact that such a woman is at that moment not even very old, and not at all incapacitated; indeed, the very opposite. "Toward fifty," Beauvoir writes,

she is in full possession of her powers; she feels she is rich in experience; that is the age at which men attain the highest positions, the most important posts; as for her, she is put into retirement. She has been taught only to devote herself to someone, and nobody wants her devotion any more. Useless, unjustified, she looks forward to the long, unpromising years she has yet to live, and she mutters: "No one needs me!"³⁸

The list of indignities she will suffer appears endless: potential sexual partners no longer find her attractive, her spouse devotes more time to the society in which he now occupies a privileged station, the children are all grown up and no longer need her. As a result, she is often told that, since her former life — the one for which she had been raised, the one in which she had for so long lived — has now come to an end, "she should," as they say, "start out toward a new future."³⁹ Unwanted, ostracized and unprepared for anything else, however, she "will sadly reply" to such suggestions "that it is too late," as Beauvoir writes, muttering to herself, bitter and inconsolable: "What's the use?"⁴⁰ What is for Beauvoir true of the life of women at each and every stage of their life is no less true of the older woman: namely, that she is only offered

freedom – from duty, from appearances, from the rigid expectations of society – at the moment “when she can make no use of it,” as Beauvoir writes.⁴¹

No longer the young girl made to please, nor the dutiful daughter, fetching wife or mother of innocents, the older woman “falls from the heaven of timeless idols,” according to Beauvoir, and finds herself “no longer anything more than a finished, outdated individual,”⁴² “prey to loneliness, regret and boredom,”⁴³ with the only remaining task that of the “problem of how to kill time.”⁴⁴ The consequences are of course not difficult to predict: such women know “that they have been duped and deceived all their lives,” as Beauvoir notes, and so, “sane and mistrustful, they often develop a pungent cynicism.”⁴⁵ A cynicism Beauvoir analyzes in terms of its origins, development and ends, but one for which she had at that time little to no sympathy. For while the older woman’s “experience enables her to unmask deceits and lies,” as Beauvoir writes, “it is not sufficient to show her the truth.”⁴⁶ “[T]he wisdom of the old woman...remains wholly negative,” says Beauvoir, “it is in the nature of opposition, indictment, denial.” “It is,” the Beauvoir of 1949 concludes, ultimately “sterile.”⁴⁷ That such a dismissive judgment as this may well appear allied with Cicero’s own old age ideology is likely a measure of the sort of difficulty faced whenever one confronts the oftentimes inconsolable experience of growing old – a difficulty in no way effaced by the fact that Beauvoir would so dramatically revise this judgment some twenty or so years later in *The Coming of Age*.⁴⁸

It should be remembered, however, strange as it might seem, that at the time the above lines were first published, Beauvoir was only a little less than forty years old. At that time in her life, in other words, when she thought a woman had already begun the irreversible descent into aging that would steal from her the charms the mirror once held, as well as the affections that were the result of those charms. From 1944 onwards, Beauvoir would later write, “the most important, the most irreparable thing that has happened to me is that...I have grown old.”⁴⁹ And this occurred, Beauvoir claims, when she was then only thirty-six-years-old. Such an early onset of aging, or at least of the sense of having already begun the aging process, may seem to some inexplicable, but becomes more comprehensible if one considers Beauvoir’s further claim that, as she notes, “Long before the eventual mutilation” of aging has left any of its most manifest traces, such a woman is already “haunted by the horror of growing old.”⁵⁰ And that horror is of course never very far away. For the woman approaching old age, even the most common, everyday objects can come to seem to her the medium of fate. Standing before a mirror and facing herself at forty-years-old, Beauvoir would later record what she saw: “Deep in that looking glass,” she writes, “old age is watching and waiting for me; and it’s inevitable, one day she’ll get me.”⁵¹ When Beauvoir first came to write of her own experience of aging, at the end of 1963’s *Force of Circumstance*, she was already well-versed in just how powerful was this need for indifference, ignorance and lies.

At the time, Beauvoir, then fifty-five-years-old, looked into the mirror to see that the old woman who was earlier only watching and waiting for her had since come all too close: “She’s got me now,” Beauvoir writes, and so the middle-aged author now finds herself before the mirror she would like to otherwise avoid, “flabbergasted,” as she says, “at the sight of this incredible thing that serves me as a face.”⁵³ But what is particularly unusual here is that it is not only the face of the then-fifty-five-year old that Beauvoir saw in the mirror, but also, as she writes, “my face *as it was*,” preserved and transformed, “attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure.”⁵³ And that is of course only the most outwardly visible sign of an aging whose effects are felt everywhere. “[T]he world around me has changed,” Beauvoir writes, “it has become smaller and narrower,” more finite, less rich, its mysteries dissolved,⁵⁴ its marvels emptied, one’s sympathies for the young tempered by the knowledge that, in Beauvoir’s words, “they perpetuate our world, and in doing so they steal it from me.”⁵⁵ Even the most memorable places that once inspired such awe in her that they became personal totems have since changed irrevocably. The Acropolis she sees now is no longer the Acropolis she once knew; old and regularly reminded now of the shortness of her future, Beauvoir suddenly feels the eyes of the young on that monument too, sensing how they stare at it with eyes trained towards a future from which she knows herself excluded. “In the eyes of those twenty-year-olds,” she says, “I see myself already dead and mummified.”⁵⁶ And the gaze that looks back from everyday objects only compounds such pain now that she is at all times aware of just how much her powers of revolt have dimmed, her joys paled, her desires faded; as “[m]emories grow thin,” she writes, “myths crack and peel, projects rot in the bud.”⁵⁷ But lest it be thought that it is Beauvoir herself who steals the sap from a world otherwise so vital and alive, it must be emphasized that, as she goes on to insist, “[i]t is not I who am saying good-bye to all those things I once enjoyed, it is they who are leaving me; the mountain paths disdain my feet. Never again shall I collapse, drunk with fatigue, into the smell of hay. Never again shall I slide down through the solitary morning snows.”⁵⁸ Inconsolable on account of all she knows herself to have so recently lost, Beauvoir cannot help but sense that all she has learned and experienced, all she has felt and thought, will have all have been for nothing: “I think with sadness,” she writes, “of all the books I’ve read, all the places I’ve seen, all the knowledge I’ve amassed and that will be no more. All the music, all the paintings, all the culture, so many places: and suddenly nothing. They made no honey, those things,” she concludes, “they can provide no one with any nourishment”: “...there is no place where it will all live again.”⁵⁹ Forsaken now by what seems to her the whole of the world, Beauvoir recalls a time when that world once seemed so open to her, so endless and promising, when she had before her “a whole life to live”; but now, looking back at her former self, she realizes “with stupor,” as she writes, just “how much I was gypped.”⁶⁰ With these words the *Force of Circumstance* ends, its last lines’ sense of defiance and resentment undimmed by that serenity so often expected of the old, and

certain cause for the controversy that would erupt with the book's publication.

Although Beauvoir would later admit that the book was indeed written with every intention of giving offense, the kind of clichés, platitudes and outright aggression which greeted its publication are nevertheless noteworthy for their representative meanness and feigned incomprehension.⁶¹ It is as though her many readers had thought, Beauvoir writes, that "I ought...to have pretended that I felt young and that I should go on feeling young until I drew my last breath."⁶² Because it is serenity people expect from the old, Beauvoir knew, and because her readers had long been in the habit of identifying with her, her own lack of serenity was something they could not tolerate because its consequences would be for them too terrible to bear: "If I am frightened by age," Beauvoir explains, "then that means *it is* frightening; which is something they do not choose to admit."⁶³ The "furious outcry" stirred by Beauvoir's attempt to understand what it meant for her to find herself aging did not, however, provoke outrage in one of Beauvoir's better-known contemporary admirers.⁶⁴ For when Jean Améry first read Beauvoir's remarks on aging he was not at all driven to denounce such unpleasantness but to turn the mirror upon himself instead, and repeat the very same experiment Beauvoir had herself undertaken. And while the terms of his own experiment were ultimately allied with hers, their results were rather different in kind.

Into the Looking Glass: Jean Améry

Beauvoir's *Force of Circumstance* comes to an end with a revolt against the mirror that reflected back to her a face she did not want to recognize as her own. Aghast to now find that her nightmare of growing old has finally come true, and that she can no longer bear to see what the force of circumstance has done to her face, Beauvoir recalls how she once looked upon that face without the least displeasure. Of the face of youth, "I gave it no thought," she writes, "it could look after itself."⁶⁵ No longer. "I loathe my appearance now," she continues

the eyebrows slipping down towards the eyes, the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring. 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.⁶⁶

These lines, among the last of Beauvoir's memoir, would afterwards inspire Jean Améry's own turn to the mirror in 1968's *On Aging*, and feature prominently at the very beginning of that book's second chapter. At the time of writing, Améry was almost exactly the same age as Beauvoir when she

wrote the above lines – and so when the two take up the subject, they are both not at all *old*, but most certainly *aging*. For Améry, however, appreciative though he was of Beauvoir's work,⁶⁷ his own experience of aging was something altogether different.⁶⁸

Originally written for radio, the five essays of which Améry's *On Aging* consist revolve around a series of protagonists through whose experience and reflections one can track something of the difference separating Beauvoir from Améry. In the book's second chapter, for instance, Améry gives the name "A" to a fifty-year-old woman, an admirer of Beauvoir, who the reader first meets as she stands before the looking glass. Améry's essay starts by describing what Beauvoir's admirer sees. For days, this A. has been noting in the mirror the development of several small yellow growths upon her eyelids – not terribly noticeable, not even particularly ugly, but still a sign of how aging has left its mark. Staring at them, A. sees the growths staring back, tries to assess what is now happening to her and finds herself in need of some greater clarity about this "dark state of affairs" into which she has recently been driven.⁶⁹ And so she turns to Beauvoir for counsel because Beauvoir had always been for her, as for so many others, a "writer she considers a friend even though they have never met."⁷⁰ As a result, A. picks up Beauvoir's *Force of Circumstance* to read the above lines about that more illustrious woman's own confrontation with the mirror, and finds herself at once "full of sympathy" and yet, at the same time, "not entirely satisfied with her friend."⁷¹ It is not that Beauvoir is wrong exactly, it is not that A. feels in any way unmoved by Beauvoir's complaint. The problem is that what really matters to A. is something Beauvoir for some reason never mentions. For what so surprises A. about Beauvoir's otherwise searching remarks is that the latter says so little about what "happens *beyond* or *beneath* the justified occasion for the complaint."⁷² And it is precisely this something else that not only most interests A. but which Améry's essay itself tries to comprehend.⁷³ Because if it is true that Beauvoir's remarks are in some respects insufficient, that they leave A. unsatisfied, then that is likely because A. possesses some form of knowledge as yet absent from Beauvoir's words, a knowledge gained during the night Beauvoir's writing day did not find but which A. discovered by persisting before the mirror without giving in to the temptation of simply turning away in disgust. For that is precisely what A. does – she keeps staring, and finds there a form of knowledge absent from Beauvoir's account but essential to understanding the ambiguity at the center of the condition of aging.⁷⁴ What, then, is the nature of this ambiguity?

In many respects, A.'s reaction is little different from Beauvoir's own. For once A's eyes find themselves fixed upon those yellow growths she sees in the mirror, for instance, she realizes that she does not like herself at all anymore and, Améry writes, perhaps even "tells herself like her friend that what now has to serve as her face has become a dreadful thing."⁷⁵ Is it self-hatred she feels? Self-disgust? Shame? No, none of those things. Instead one

should say that A. is simply tired of herself. And yet what A. does eventually come to discover in that most ungenerous mirror is also a certain form of self-satisfaction, some “pride of having already endured for a long time” on account of which she “wears her brittle skin like a brave warrior wears his scars.”⁷⁶ She is alienated from herself, of course, but she is also getting closer to herself at the same time. This is indeed the essential paradox of old age, and it is precisely this ambiguity that begins to transfix her as soon as she knows that there is “no chance of ever [again] being reconciled to anything unambiguous.”⁷⁷ For even though she experiences, like Beauvoir, a distinct sense of misrecognition whenever someone calls her by that name of hers she now associates only with her younger self, this alienation is but a single pole over which her existence hangs taut. For “in the same breath and in the same tick of time it becomes obvious to her” that, as Améry writes,

if she just perseveres in front of the mirror and does not turn away from the glass, irritated as only a stranger can be, that she, along with all the yellow flecks and lackluster eyes, is *closer* to herself, with all her weariness and intimate familiarity, than ever before, and that in front of her mirror image, now a stranger to her, she is condemned to become more and more oppressively herself.⁷⁸

And it is here that A. becomes for a moment so markedly different from her friend Beauvoir. For A. “knows that she not *only* detests her face, that it is not *only* alienated from her,” but that this face is also the sign of all she has *gained*, that her face is perhaps only now hers for the first time: the face wanted by the world is no more, the world that wanted her face is no more, and so what she now sees in the mirror is a face that is hers and hers alone.⁷⁹ Her loss is here just as much a gain to be had by those who, as Améry writes, “have the *patience* to persevere in front of the mirror, who can summon up the courage not to let themselves be chased away by yellow flecks and dehydration, who do not internalize the conventional judgment of others and submit to it” – only for them can the reflecting mirror become the medium through which one not only discovers this essential ambiguity, but also comes to recognize oneself through that image opposed to the world so as to then experience “an increased sense of self” at the sight of a face that is finally one’s own and that of no one else.⁸⁰

But of course this additional self is not for that reason the source of any unambiguous joy. For such a self does also belong to a body that is the engine of our ruin, a ruin everywhere visible in the veins that protrude, the stomach that grows, in the toenails that become thick and cracked. The body which now possesses an additional, augmented self also knows how the world in which one once participated has since become “a clear negation of ourselves,” and that this aging body now “cuts us off from world and space with its heavy breathing, painful legs, and the arthritically plagued articulation of our bones.”⁸¹ Nature, mountain, valley, water, landscape – each is now equally inhospitable, and all are thus felt to be the “contradiction of [one’s own]

person.”⁸² And so the body that weighs one down, that cuts one off from the world seems to have now changed its function – as the threat long feared from outside comes suddenly from within, the body becomes for the aging person the source of a “death threatening them as a murder.”⁸³

And so at the same time as the aging body becomes the source of a new sense of self, the mind cannot but reject its pains, and will forever afterwards seek to separate itself from a body that continually wears it down: “If only the damned cadaver would leave one in peace!”, shouts the aging mind.⁸⁴ As a result, the sense of self provided by this body will also be seen as a “hostile *new ego*, foreign and, in the exact meaning of the word, odious.”⁸⁵ Even here, however, the situation remains ambiguous because the aging body will just as frequently become the object of a new kind of tenderness. “You poor stomach,” says the old man

you’ve been carrying me through a world of streets, mountains, cobblestones, and gas pedals! Now you’ve been taken from time and work and can’t do any more; you’re both tired, just like my heart that won’t allow me anymore to go upstairs two steps at a time.⁸⁶

And so the older person may very well become transfixed by the paradox of this newly added, newly loved and newly pitied body that is at once one’s own and not. “I am my leg, my heart, my stomach,” say those who are aging, “...I am all my living cells as well as those only sluggishly renewing themselves – and at the same time I am still *not* those cells. I am becoming a stranger to myself the more I approach them and, while doing so, becoming nonetheless myself.”⁸⁷ The aging person finds itself rivetted to this paradox, a paradox that is in some sense insuperable even if it must nevertheless still be solved. And with time it will most assuredly be solved, one way or another; the question is only: on whose terms?

Another scene, this time featuring a protagonist who is not now a reader of Beauvoir but a man, again called A., who wakes up in the middle of the night with a toothache. Such a man knows, of course, that his pain can be stopped by painkillers, and then more permanently stilled by surgery and dentures designed to replace his body so that it might better accord with the world’s demand: Fix those teeth, and be quiet about it. The path to this kind of normality would then consist in the old man brushing off all of his pain and humiliation without complaint and thereby earning the “respect owed to [the old] by a society that does not want to be bothered by the spectacle of their demise.”⁸⁸ But that is most certainly not the only path. For once A. finds himself lost in the nighttime pain of his toothache, he gets to thinking: what if he were to accept the fact that the world of mountains, casual talk and convention is now lost to him, reject the painkiller, refuse the surgery, and renounce that need for society’s approval which had animated him for so long? What if he were to count his nighttime suffering as a gain rather than a loss? For there is undoubtedly some truth to the idea that, as Améry writes,

"We only discover our body in pain and aging," and that this body of suffering "is just as much a true ego as the stratified time the aging have built up inside themselves" – indeed, the man in pain knows precisely this, knows that the night of suffering is just as real, that the body that writhes is just as much himself, indeed, perhaps even more himself, than would be the body rejected and replaced by painkillers and surgery.⁸⁹ For while A. knows himself to now be, as he says, "reduced in my ability to function," he also knows that this reduction is not only a loss: "I am increased in what immediately belongs to me," he says, "I gain in ego," he continues, and this additional bodily gain may be not only *the equal* of what was once, but rather *more* me, *more* true.⁹⁰ And so, as Améry suggestively writes, "One would have to shed light on the tormenting and festive minute in which A. gave himself over entirely to his toothache as *his*, eventually becoming totally engrossed in its inflammation, and determine whether this was the authentic moment of truth."⁹¹

That at least is the question Améry sets himself as he follows the man with the toothache into the night; unfortunately, however, it is not the kind of question that can ultimately be answered affirmatively. For even though Améry will go so far as to say that A. there "became himself in a new way," that it was the toothache that "helped him to his, or at least a new, ego," whatever moment of truth there was in that night was just that – momentary, since the contrary of what Améry here calls the "bodily ego," that is to say, the "mental ego," always "turns out to be the stronger."⁹² In fact, it is not at all a fair fight — for that ego made by and for others is also one's own: indeed, it "is just as much something of our own as anything that immediately and physically experiences itself," Améry writes.⁹³ And because this reality will "not release us as long as we exist," the older man can never be sure what to make of his now-enlarged and ecstatic body of pain.⁹⁴ "To be sure," Améry writes,

he can start a relationship with his pain and acquire something he could perhaps call his "knowledge." But such is only possible during the night: not only because society demands that he fill out the income tax declaration free of pain and with a clear mind, but also because he cannot accept the ego of toothlessness, refused by the world and expelled from it, that threatens him. For he is "world" himself, he is society, and he sees himself with the latter's eyes. A. himself thinks he senses that society senses him: therefore, he wants to preserve the ego of fresh teeth he's dragged with him from his youth and at any price get rid of the other ego he called in the middle of the night his "authentic ego."⁹⁵

It would seem, then, that time is only regained once the mirror is made to lie so as to thereby maintain the lie society – and the society in us – requires us to keep. But what of that man with white teeth, has he escaped the uncertainty of the night and achieved some greater certainty in the day? Here too problems abound. For why has one sought to maintain those teeth, the other

that head of hair, the other that fetching figure? Each imagined that those attributes were the focal points around which their social egos turned, believed that it was these attributes that made them what they were. But is this identification any less fanciful than the one which seized A. during the night of his toothache, when he was convinced that that specific moment was the moment of truth and all the others a lie? For who's to say that it was not the timbre of the voice that was for others the focal point of the first man, not his teeth; the heave of laughter that distinguished the second, not his hair; the gleam in the eyes that made the woman, not her figure? The image to which one submits when remaking oneself in this way is often that of a self that "has sometimes not existed in reality at all," as Améry writes – which naturally begs the question of whether this search for greater security will indeed succeed by so summarily casting off the knowledge of the night.⁹⁶ "The reality of the social ego we experience as such every day and to which we submit," Améry writes, "is in the end just as questionable as A.'s nocturnal toothache ego" – here too, then, there is no easy way out.⁹⁷ No way to resolve the matter into anything unambiguous.

And so this essential ambiguity is of course real, but only up to a point. Because the skin does actually separate me from the world, because the bodies of the aged are in fact no longer part of the world, this much longed-for "ambiguity becomes an antinomy"⁹⁸: "in aging," Améry explains, "I am myself *through* my body and *against* it."⁹⁹ The contradiction is at once both irresolvable and real, and can only be recognized at the extremes – when the body that was once an afterthought becomes irrepressible, first ignored, then loathed, then loved and ignored once again; when the world that was once mine rejects me, mocks me, excludes me, instigates my rebellion and then compels me to submit just the same. Here it is ambiguity that must be learned on the other side of that antimony for which aging serves as propaedeutic and initiation. "It is aging that exposes us to that kind of consciousness," Améry writes, "and makes us capable of it."¹⁰⁰ For it is only then that we become capable of integrating within ourselves this antinomial relationship between alienation and familiarity, association and disassociation, ego, non-ego, anti-ego and society, all kindred, different in kind, separate and yet combined, their relation only determinable once that "world whose image is logic" leaves us as we age.¹⁰¹ "[W]e have to take logical contradictoriness upon ourselves," Améry writes, "have to take upon ourselves absurdity and the risk of every mental confusion when we meditate on our condition"¹⁰² – and to do this one needs the mirror to find there disgust and fascination, needs, too, the desire to smash the mirror and then so luxuriate in its grip that the age one has recently achieved but otherwise "disparaged in resignation" can then become the medium through which knowledge of one's condition becomes as manifest and unavoidable as the flesh that retrains the mind until that moment when one is so well appraised of this condition that one is, as Améry says, "ready for revolt."¹⁰³ That world the old once understood no longer exists and they cannot understand the world in which they live; they are compelled

to decipher its signs but they cannot do it; their world and their egos are outmoded and destroyed and yet they must remain hopelessly, worthlessly faithful to both. And so, for Améry, the only way they can continue without deceiving themselves is to lead what he calls an “inconsistent revolt of fighting out a contradiction.”¹⁰⁴ In this, the old are condemned to both “accept and to refuse their annihilation” as ambiguity becomes antinomy becomes contradiction: for this is what it is to age without seeking solace in fairy tales for the benefit of a society that will never repay the sacrifice.¹⁰⁵

Reclamation

For Beauvoir, like Améry, the problem of old age can only be properly posed when set against the background of that greater ignorance, inattention and avoidance characteristic of society’s treatment of suffering in general and of the suffering of the old in particular. And it is for this reason that *The Coming of Age* begins with the fable of Prince Siddhartha. For Beauvoir, the fable is exemplary because Siddhartha rejects such indifference so as to see the old as individuals and societies rarely do, that is to say, as part and parcel of themselves. “When Buddha was still Prince Siddhartha,” Beauvoir begins

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?’¹⁰⁶

“Buddha recognized his own fate in the person of a very aged man,” Beauvoir continues, “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.¹⁰⁷ And they evade it because they know it to be their own unfortunate fate. And so, as a result, one banishes any thought of the realities of old age from the course of one’s life because one knows very well how that time which exists past the prime of life entails a form of existence hostile to the one and only life one wants to live. Instead, one lives as though in a children’s book, pretending that one will someday transform from a caterpillar into a butterfly – rather than that most hated, but more real metamorphosis from a butterfly into a worm as one passes into old age.¹⁰⁸

In propagating such illusions and further perpetuating the exclusion of the old, it is of course not only the old who suffer. “We carry this ostracism so

far," Beauvoir writes, "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."¹⁰⁹ Even though we all know that this is indeed our fate, that what it is that the old know about the course of a life is what we too will one day come to know. And so "[w]e must stop cheating," as Beauvoir writes, exhorting her readers: "...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."¹¹⁰ For if we were to take seriously this solidarity with the old Beauvoir calls for, then it soon becomes "clear that *everything* has to be 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."¹¹¹ The old experience what the clichés never admit: the world is disappearing, things and places and people fall silent the moment they offer nothing new to the senses, and a vicious circle will soon be established within which inactivity results in curiosity's withdrawal that then leads to a loss of enthusiasm whose effect is that the eyes and imagination of the old are constantly engaged in that hate-filled task of what Beauvoir calls "depopulating the world."¹¹² And while one might suppose that a respite from this indifference might be found among those who care for the old, it is often the very opposite. Insecure and defenseless, the old are at such times almost entirely dependent upon others, and thus live only at the mercy of others' whims, affections and inconstancy. And because the old know that they can be abandoned at any moment, they become increasingly distrustful of those upon whom they rely, terrified of whatever it is that might serve as an excuse for their eventual abandonment.

As a result, Beauvoir says, the old possess what she calls "an ill-defined sense of injustice," and will often act out of resentment, rage and rebellion.¹¹³ Just as often, however, these resentments remain below the surface, harnessed but no less real – and, one might add, no less just. "The old person's resentment," Beauvoir writes, "...smoulders deep inside him. He feels that he is excluded from his times; he survives rather than lives. He sees everything that he has desired, believed in and loved called into question or even denied; he revolts against this fundamental dispossession," evoking in him a fury directed, more often than not, against those younger than he because each seems to be the agent of his own dispossession.¹¹⁴ As a result, he will sometimes place little store by the feelings of others, will act in brutal self-interest, display no respect for the customs governing those younger than he, and will then take his revenge for the injustices he has suffered, becoming petty and mean. But what of it? "These attitudes may be irritating," Beauvoir writes, "But they must be understood. The elderly man, forgotten and treated with disrespect by the new generations, is challenging his judges both now and in the future" by his revolt against standards and expectations that are not his own.¹¹⁵ Of course those younger than him will often humor him by telling him how

young he looks, will offer him smiles of pity as though he is a thing of childish in consequence, will send him looks of disdain for the ideas he holds but which are no longer in step with the times as they limit his actions to those conforming not to his character but to those designed to make him useless and inoffensive – and then people wonder why he appears so sensitive to the slights and injustices he is made to endure. “Wronged and oppressed,” Beauvoir writes, “he retaliates by refusing to take part in the game. The adult world is no longer his: he challenges its watchwords and even its ethics. He no longer imposes any discipline upon himself. He feels that ‘everything is allowed,’” not because he is incapable of controlling himself, but because he doesn’t see why he *should* any longer control himself.¹¹⁶ To such people, one readily applies the label “anti-social,” and sees in their actions all the attributes of those malcontents today disparaged for not playing by the rules – in doing so, however, one does not recognize, as Beauvoir writes, that “these are men who base their conduct on their situation. Many of their attitudes,” she continues, “are attitudes of protest: *but their state is one that calls for protest.*”¹¹⁷ It is as though one were to criticize the inmates of an asylum for their dirtiness and lack of hygiene. “Dirtiness?” Beauvoir asks, “But they have been tossed on to the rubbish heap,” she replies, “so why should they obey the laws of health or decency?”¹¹⁸ As a result, all such protests should be seen instead, Beauvoir writes, as “ways of making a claim,” a claim the old lack the ability to make otherwise and which others will not otherwise register.¹¹⁹

For “[w]hy should an old person be better than the adult or child he was?” Beauvoir rightly asks, “It is quite hard enough,” she continues, “to remain a human being when everything, health, memory, possessions, standing and authority has been taken from you. The old person’s struggle to do so has pitiable or ludicrous sides to it, and his fads, his meanness, and his deceitful ways may irritate one or make one smile.”¹²⁰ “[B]ut in reality,” she concludes, “it is a very moving struggle. It is the refusal to sink below the human level, a refusal to become the insect, the inert object to which the adult world wishes to reduce the aged. There is something heroic in desiring to preserve a minimum of dignity in the midst of such total deprivation.”¹²¹ For Beauvoir, then, there is something enviable in this rebellion of the old, this resistance to what one has both become and been made.

At the same time, however, this is not, according to Beauvoir, even the most important characteristic for which one should envy the old. For is it not also true of the old, of he who “discovers that he is no longer going anywhere,” of the one who “knows that one is no longer getting ready for anything,” that they are also the ones who have come to see “that the idea of advancing towards a goal was a delusion”?¹²² The notion of upward progress, felt and experienced in youth and then preserved into middle age, falls apart for the old — and although this recognition is “accompanied by an often bitter disillusionment,” the result is also that one has been set “free from false notions.”¹²³ As a result, Beauvoir writes, “[t]his sweeping away of fetishes and

illusions is the truest, most worth-while of all the contributions brought by age."¹²⁴ And while some might reply that one need not pass over into old age in order to know the end of these illusions, Beauvoir claims that this is not at all true: "knowing is not feeling," she counters, "All truth is 'that which has become.' The truth of the human state is accomplished only at the end of our own becoming."¹²⁵ Here no thought experiment will prove sufficient, no half-experience of loss will approximate the total absence of a future known only to the body of the old.

For aging is, as Beauvoir emphasizes, ultimately a process whose last stage has been long prepared. It was prefigured in youth, its infamy ensured at adulthood, its shocks having as their condition the feverish pace and putative success of adulthood, then followed by a retirement made useless once one's occupation has been taken. For what were to have been one's golden years are precisely those years in which one will not be able live as the person one has become. "That is the crime of our society," Beauvoir writes, "It's 'old-age policy' is scandalous. But even more scandalous still," she continues, "is the treatment that it inflicts upon the majority of men *during their youth and their maturity*. It prefabricates the maimed and wretched state that is theirs when they are old."¹²⁶ Bodies wasted by work cannot enjoy the leisure to which they've been condemned, and a life made to be maximized and within which free time was always seen as throwaway time is now one's entire lot, as one has to confront the fact that one is not only cast out from society, but from oneself.¹²⁷ It is thus little surprise that "the vast majority of mankind look upon the coming of old age with sorrow or rebellion," as Beauvoir writes, since old age is, she says, "life's parody," a joke turned against those who once believed in that purpose and prosperity on whose basis they worked and that was then stolen from them the moment they were supposed to have received it.¹²⁸ And while it is of course true that society could indeed be so well arranged that one would then have the chance to "die without having suffered any degradation," as Beauvoir writes, that is not in fact how society has been arranged.¹²⁹ Instead, "society turns away from the aged worker as though he belonged to another species."¹³⁰ Indeed, she continues, "Society cares about the individual only in so far as he is profitable. The young know this. Their anxiety as they enter in upon social life matches the anguish of the old as they are excluded from it."¹³¹ But "between these two ages," Beauvoir writes, "the problem is hidden by routine," that conspiracy of silence within which one prepares the way for the degradations one will suffer when old but which are rarely if ever questioned because to do so would be to question the very systems upon which our contemporary lives depend.¹³²

To break the conspiracy of silence surrounding old age, according to Beauvoir, requires first recognizing how "the whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us" in that state of old age that is at once our individual and societal destiny.¹³³ And if this is true, then one would

do well to today 'recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman' wherever we see them, no matter how miserable their present state might be, because it is in fact our own future we are at such times witnessing.¹³⁴ Difficult and outlandish as such acts of identification might be, they are not only legitimate means for integrating the whole of the course of a life within the more limited scope of our own blinkered present; they are also opportunities for extending the bounds of our solidarities and social philosophies to better address contemporary problems. Because each and every worker must today live under the constant threat of replacement and socially engineered obsolescence realized already in the case of the elderly, for instance, Beauvoir is undoubtedly right to recognize in such common degradations the possibility for a new kind of alliance "between the workers and the unproductive old."¹³⁵ But if the forces of collective misfortune are indeed as common across the ages as Beauvoir suggests – even if the process of social degradation does only truly culminate with the onset of old age – then why shouldn't the bonds of solidarity be so extended as to include all those for whom the contemporary ideology of progress and its accompanying injunctions to resilience, innovation, disruption and adaptation are just as injurious as they are for the old themselves? For such questions to present themselves with the sort of theoretical urgency they already possess in practice, however, individuals and whole societies would have to first take upon themselves the task of staring unstintingly into that looking glass of old age otherwise spurned for fear that one might find there the sort of irreducible, ultimately uncomfortable reality Theodor W. Adorno once approvingly identified, now nearly a century ago, as the very point at which philosophy must come to a stop. Because theory otherwise wants only to continue, uninterrupted and implacable, before realities its most strenuous efforts will show themselves incapable of cognizing so long as those realities leave little impression upon a body of philosophy immunized against the corruptions of the concrete everywhere avoided in the practice of contemporary philosophy. It is for this reason that the critical theory of Adorno early abandoned the traditional philosophical search for origins and goals, and sought to instead practice a form of "last philosophy"¹³⁶ committed at all times to tracking the progress of that "logic of disintegration"¹³⁷ the present essay has sought to follow with Beauvoir and Amery in the experience and knowledge of the old. For critical theory to still possess some purchase on the present, such a philosophy would have to demonstrate again its commitment to the kind of experiments in philosophical form anticipated by Adorno, exemplified by Beauvoir and Amery, but otherwise so sorely lacking today.¹³⁸

- ¹ Among the many social problems for which the old are held responsible today, few are mentioned as frequently as that supposedly poor state of national budgets for which the old are thought responsible because of the state provision of old-age pensions. Too many older people who live too long, and whose collective care costs the state too much money – so goes the usual refrain. As a result, the old are then made liable for the implementation of austerity policies that not only increase their own immiseration but that of the wider society too. For an analysis of how such policies affect the old around the world, see the most recent report of the International Labor Organization: “World Social Protection Report 2020-2022.” There are, however, a great many other social and political problems for which the old are also held responsible today. In the wake of the recent Brexit vote and USA presidential election of Donald Trump, for instance, many political analysts tried to explain what they saw as their respective nation’s continuing conservatism and, for them, nearly-inexplicable state of electoral politics by referring to the deleterious effects of older people’s outsized role in the electorate. See Fitch, “The Young Are the Biggest Losers.” From the perspective of Silicon Valley, the very condition of the old appears so frightful that many of its tycoons are obsessed with eliminating the necessity of old age altogether. See O’Connell, *To Be a Machine*. For a general survey of changing conceptions and life experiences of the old, especially as they are affected by recent cultural and economic trends, see Pickard, “Old Age and the Neoliberal Life Course.”
- ² To the best of my knowledge, there exists no sustained historical, philosophical or literary discussion treating both Beauvoir’s and Améry’s writings on old age. Indeed, the few studies that do mention the writers together typically restrict themselves to mentioning Améry’s crediting certain writers as influences – Vladimir Jankélévitch, Herbert Plügge and André Gorz – and naming others with whom he entered into explicit dialogue, like Marcel Proust, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Entirely absent from the scholarly literature, however, is any effort to reconstruct the terms of the intertextual dialogue Améry develops with Beauvoir’s work or parse the many differences and similarities between their respective works as constituting an important episode in the history of social philosophy. The lone exception to this rule appears to be Brandl, *Philosophie nach Auschwitz*, 75-80. For a brief discussion of Améry’s forerunners in French intellectual life, see Boussart, “Jean Améry’s Essay «Über das Altern»,” 79-90.
- ³ In recent continental philosophy, this inattention is all the more remarkable in that so many of its most pressing concerns intersect with aspects central to the experience and knowledge of the old. Think, for instance, of contemporary interest in such notions as *non-contemporaneity*, *untimeliness*, *obsolescence*, *superfluity*, *precarious life*, *vulnerability*, *care*, *late work*, *critiques of progress*, etc. In other fields, by contrast, the subject of old age has long been prominent. For reference, one might here mention the important work of gerontology, critical gerontology and feminist gerontology studies, as well as recent cultural studies and literary studies-based interest in what has come to be called “age studies” in USA-based humanities departments. For a recent gloss on these different approaches, see Finlay, “Intimately Old.”
- ⁴ For the most comprehensive historical treatment of old age, see Minois, *History of Old Age*.
- ⁵ Cicero, “De Senectute,” 11.
- ⁶ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 6.
- ⁷ Beauvoir, 380.
- ⁸ For Beauvoir’s critique of both Cicero’s politicization of old age and defense of what she calls the “conservative ideology” of ancient Rome and its ailing senators, see Beauvoir, 118-120. For a brief

account of the private grief and sorrow from which Cicero's *De Senectute* likely emerged, see the "Introduction" to Cicero, "De Senectute," 2-7.

- ⁹ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 3. That Beauvoir refers here to older men, rather than older women, is not peculiar to this particular passage but is in fact characteristic of *The Coming of Age* as a whole. For an analysis of this phenomenon, see Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently*, 49-55. At the same time, it should also be mentioned that Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* nevertheless anticipates what one would today call an 'intersectional' perspective through its focus on those determinants of old age deriving from class, wealth, race, culture and occupation. For the most sustained discussion of this aspect of Beauvoir's work, see Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*.
- ¹⁰ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 3-4.
- ¹¹ Beauvoir, 485.
- ¹² Améry, *On Aging*, xxii.
- ¹³ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 485.
- ¹⁴ Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 149.
- ¹⁵ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 543.
- ¹⁶ Beauvoir's regular engagement with the subject of aging is also to be found in *La Force des choses (Force of Circumstance)* (1963), *Une mort très douce (A Very Easy Death)* (1964), *La Femme rompue (The Woman Destroyed)* (1967), *Tout compte fait (All Said and Done)* (1972) and *La Cérémonie des adieux (Adieux)* (1981).
- ¹⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 31.
- ¹⁸ Beauvoir, 31.
- ¹⁹ It should be pointed out that Beauvoir's designation of older women as a 'third sex' is not at all meant critically; indeed, the very opposite. For Beauvoir, such post-menopausal women are conceived, instead, as being "now delivered from the servitude imposed by her female nature." "Often," she continues, "...this release from female physiology is expressed in a health, a balance, a vigor that they lacked before." Lest it be misunderstood, however, that Beauvoir here engages in a kind of biological reductionism, one would be well-advised to simply continue reading: "I categorically reject the notion of psycho-physiological parallelism," she writes two pages later, "...If I mention it at all, it is because it still haunts many minds in spite of its philosophical and scientific bankruptcy." See Beauvoir, 31, 33.
- ²⁰ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 4.
- ²¹ Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 146.
- ²² Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 103.
- ²³ Beauvoir, 103.
- ²⁴ Beauvoir, 103.
- ²⁵ Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 147.
- ²⁶ Scholarly inattention to Beauvoir's work on aging has frequently been noted. According to Penelope Deutscher, for instance, "Beauvoir's large-scale late work is often omitted from theoretical assessments of her work, and this is a missed opportunity." Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 120n.84. For a brief list of exceptions, see Deutscher's just-mentioned footnote. For

more recent studies, see Stoller, *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age*; Martin, "Old Age and the Other-Within"; Deutscher, "Afterlives"; and Segal, *Out of Time*.

²⁷ Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 146-147.

²⁸ The account most relevant to Beauvoir's understanding of that process by which the self is constituted by others, and especially by the *gaze* of others, is to be found in Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of *the look* in *Being and Nothingness*. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 340-400.

²⁹ Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 146.

³⁰ Beauvoir, 499.

³¹ Beauvoir, 499.

³² According to Oliver Davis, this 'bleak tradition' tends to "highlight the sense in which old age reduces the human subject, erasing both achievements and differences," can be traced back as far as Aristotle – if not to ancient Egypt – and includes such authors much cited by Beauvoir as Montaigne. Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently*, 37.

³³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 575.

³⁴ Beauvoir, 575.

³⁵ Beauvoir, 576.

³⁶ Beauvoir, 580.

³⁷ Beauvoir, 581.

³⁸ Beauvoir, 584.

³⁹ Beauvoir, 595.

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, 595.

⁴¹ Beauvoir, 584.

⁴² Beauvoir, 588.

⁴³ Beauvoir, 591.

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, 592.

⁴⁵ Beauvoir, 596.

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, 596.

⁴⁷ Beauvoir, 596.

⁴⁸ That it is often difficult to speak about old age without relying on the terms of Cicero's old age ideology can also be demonstrated by the many occasions in which Beauvoir herself reverts to the terms of that ideology when describing, for instance, the aging and failing health of both her mother, Françoise Beauvoir, and longtime partner, Jean-Paul Sartre. Of her mother's later years, Beauvoir will write of how her mother's vitality filled her with wonder, how she respected her mother's courage and admired her for not getting bogged down in the past as so many others do. See Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, 19, 18. Of Sartre's failing health, Beauvoir writes admiringly of his uncomplaining fortitude, serenity of mind, moderation and constancy. At the same time, however, Beauvoir regrets how the passions of Sartre's youth have now so left him that he begins to take everything with such calm and uncharacteristic equanimity, and thus appears, like

Beauvoir's mother before, utterly shameless in the face of the sort of indecencies he would have never tolerated previously. See Beauvoir, *Adieux*, 59, 75, 124, 52, 90.

⁴⁹ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 669. A closer study of Beauvoir's work, however, reveals a considerably more complicated picture. For she will elsewhere date the onset on her own sense of having aged completely differently, and she will at other times claim that she possesses no real sense of having aged at all. In *All Said and Done*, for instance, she writes that "my ageing became apparent to me between 1958 and 1962." Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 131. And earlier, in the same book, she writes, "since I finished *Force of Circumstance*...I do not feel I have aged...Like everybody else, I am incapable of an inner experience of it: age is one of the things that cannot be realized. Seeing that my health is good, my body gives me no token of age. I am sixty-three: and this truth remains foreign to me." Beauvoir, 40. Here, in Beauvoir's denial of any personal experience of growing old, there would seem to be not only a marked contradiction with so many of her other statements, but also the sense that living a life of projects can become the means by which old age goes unfelt. Compare, for instance, a similar sentiment in the memoir of Beauvoir's longtime partner, Claude Lanzmann. "It has never occurred to me, in all the years I have amassed," Lanzmann writes at eighty-four-years-old, "to dissociate myself from the present, to say, for example, 'In my time...' My time is the time I am living right now and even if I like the world less and less – and with good reason – it is mine, absolutely. No retirement, no retreat, I don't know what it means to grow old..." Lanzmann, *The Patagonian Hare*, 526-527.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 575.

⁵¹ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 672.

⁵² Beauvoir, 672.

⁵³ Beauvoir, 673; my italics.

⁵⁴ Beauvoir, 669.

⁵⁵ Beauvoir, 670.

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, 671.

⁵⁷ Beauvoir, 673.

⁵⁸ Beauvoir, 673.

⁵⁹ Beauvoir, 674.

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, 674.

⁶¹ Critical responses to Beauvoir's books were not only significant for the commonplaces and clichés with which her work was greeted, but also for the personal attacks so often waged against her. These *ad feminam* attacks resulted, in the case of *The Second Sex*, for instance, in Emmanuel Mounier's lament about the "tone of resentment" he detected throughout Beauvoir's book, as well as Albert Camus's criticism that her work had the effect of "making the French male look ridiculous." For further details, see Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir*, 261.

⁶² Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 131.

⁶³ Beauvoir, 131; my italics.

⁶⁴ Beauvoir, 146.

⁶⁵ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 672.

⁶⁶ Beauvoir, 672-673.

⁶⁷ In his 1970 review of Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse*, Améry begins by noting his deep appreciation of Beauvoir's *La Force des choses*: "Die schönsten und anrührendsten Worte, die ich jemals über das Altern las, fand ich auf den letzten Seiten von Simone de Beauvoirs dritten Memoirenband *La Force des choses*..." [I find the last pages of Simone de Beauvoir's *Force of Circumstance* to be the most beautiful and touching I have ever read about aging...]. Améry, "Das Alter - ein Politikum? Simone de Beauvoirs jüngstes Werk," 381. Améry's review was originally published in *Die Zeit* on April 10, 1970. I would like to thank Sara Walker for bringing this article to my attention, as well as for her generous help with translations from the German.

⁶⁸ For Améry, it was only when he was in his mid-50s, that is to say, after the Nazi death camps and another twenty years of journalistic writing, that he was able to finally write what it was he had on his mind – a fact that meant, for him, that it was ultimately rather late in life that he was able to reach that stage others typically achieve in their thirties. This discrepancy was "reason enough," he would later write, "for me to feel aging particularly painfully. I was at the beginning, and at the same time, letting the reins drop, I was galloping towards the end" – for even though he was in some sense only just starting out on his writing career, the same could not be said of his life: that was already more than half gone. As quoted in Heidelberger-Leonard, *The Philosopher of Auschwitz*, 172.

⁶⁹ Améry, *On Aging*, 28.

⁷⁰ Améry, 28.

⁷¹ Améry, 28.

⁷² Améry, 28; my italics.

⁷³ Améry's critique of Beauvoir – via his protagonist A. – is often at pains to demonstrate just how measured and nuanced is his critical judgment. Writing about the difference between Beauvoir and A., for instance, Améry will write on the subject of Beauvoir's disgust with her mirror image that "A. [is] different from her friend [Beauvoir] or at least different from the way she described it." Améry, 32; my italics. Despite this nuance, Améry's critique can be tracked throughout the essay. At its beginning, for instance, when A. thinks that her minor facial deformity might be caused by xanthelasma, she then associates this source of her sickness with Xanthippe, the wife of Socrates, assumes this name as her own, and chides Beauvoir for not being as Xanthippe-like as she is herself. When A. recalls how Socrates' Xanthippe acquired a bad reputation and then adopts Xanthippe's name, for instance, A. thereby assumes a fundamentally contradictory identity: she is at once both the object of societal disdain as well as the proud subject of the same kind of bad reputation imposed upon Xanthippe. By adopting this name, A. thus differentiates herself from Beauvoir's decision to remain at the level of unambiguous alienation, while she has, to the contrary, chosen to remain long enough in front of the mirror to achieve that more ambiguous relationship with aging through which she comes to recognize her own self-satisfaction in her aging condition. After recalling Beauvoir's line about her face being marked by the 'pox of time,' Améry accords to his protagonist a gentle rebuke: "A. mumbles," Améry writes, "poor Simone, you who suffer without being a Xanthippe like me." Améry, 28.

⁷⁴ Améry, 30. While Améry here uses the notion of ambiguity to distinguish A.'s relationship towards aging from that of Beauvoir, Améry surely knew just how central the concept of ambiguity was to the work of Beauvoir (and Merleau-Ponty). Perhaps, then, Améry's own use of the word might be seen as an attempt to signal both his inheritance and distance from Beauvoir inasmuch as, for him, the ambiguous situation of old age culminates in a contradictory state of *antinomy* from which there is little to no hope for release. Indeed, this more stark sense of ambiguity – as antinomy – might be said to serve as a principal point of differentiation between his work and

Beauvoir's, and can be demonstrated in terms of how both their premises and conclusions differ. Améry's 1968 preface to *On Aging's* first edition, for instance, states that his own book's "contradictory premise was the total acceptance of inescapable and scandalous things" – which is precisely the kind of premise Améry would criticize Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* for not taking on as its own. Améry, xxii. In his 1972 review of the German-language translation of that book, Améry takes issue with Beauvoir's conclusions in the following terms: "Der Gegensatz zwischen ihrer Elaboration und ihren Schlußfolgerungen ist flagrant....Simone de Beauvoirs Revolte wäre sinnvoll nur durch die Annahme des Widerspruches, das heißt: die totale Anerkennung der Hoffnungslosigkeit. Die Introdution einer Hoffnung auf die «ideal Gesellschaft» als Waffe gegen das Nichts macht den Aufstand Madame de Beauvoirs zu einem blind irrenden." [The contrast between what she details and her conclusions is flagrant...Simone de Beauvoir's revolt would only make sense if it were to accept the following contradiction: the total acceptance of hopelessness. The introduction of a hope for the 'ideal society' as a weapon against the Nothingness makes Madame de Beauvoir's revolt stray blindly]. Améry, "Der Skandal das Alterns," 392. Améry's review was originally published in *Die Zeit* on March 31, 1972. It is perhaps as a result of Améry's skepticism about all such recommendations, as well as his hostility to utopian political rhetoric, that his 1977 preface to the fourth edition of *On Aging* sought to once again underscore the aporetic nature of his own meditation. "Today as much as yesterday," he writes, "I think that society has to undertake everything to relieve old and aging persons of their unpleasant destiny. And at the same time, I stick to my position that all high-minded and reverential efforts in this direction, though indeed capable of being somewhat soothing – thus also being harmless analgesics – are still not capable of changing or improving *anything fundamental* about the tragic hardship of aging." See Améry, *On Aging*, xviii.

⁷⁵ Améry, 29.

⁷⁶ Améry, 30.

⁷⁷ Améry, 30-31.

⁷⁸ Améry, 31.

⁷⁹ Améry, 32.

⁸⁰ Améry, 32.

⁸¹ Améry, 35.

⁸² Améry, 37.

⁸³ Améry, 38.

⁸⁴ Améry, 39.

⁸⁵ Améry, 39.

⁸⁶ Améry, 40.

⁸⁷ Améry, 40.

⁸⁸ Améry, 42.

⁸⁹ Améry, 42.

⁹⁰ Améry, 43.

⁹¹ Améry, 45.

⁹² Améry, 46, 46, 47.

⁹³ Améry, 48.

⁹⁴ Améry, 48.

⁹⁵ Améry, 48-49.

⁹⁶ Améry, 50.

⁹⁷ Améry, 50.

⁹⁸ Améry, 51. The force of this shift from *ambiguity* to *antinomy* is even more striking in the German-language original, since Améry does not there use the more common *Mehrdeutigkeit* or *Ambiguität* for *ambiguity* but instead preserves the French original: “Die Ambiguité wird zur Antinomie.” Améry, “Über das Altern,” 79.

⁹⁹ Améry, *On Aging*, 40.

¹⁰⁰ Améry, 51.

¹⁰¹ Améry, 51.

¹⁰² Améry, 51.

¹⁰³ Améry, 34.

¹⁰⁴ Améry, 102.

¹⁰⁵ Améry, 102.

¹⁰⁶ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 1.

¹⁰⁷ Beauvoir, 1.

¹⁰⁸ See Beauvoir, 13.

¹⁰⁹ Beauvoir, 4.

¹¹⁰ Beauvoir, 5.

¹¹¹ Beauvoir, 7; my italics.

¹¹² Beauvoir, 451.

¹¹³ Beauvoir, 477.

¹¹⁴ Beauvoir, 478.

¹¹⁵ Beauvoir, 479.

¹¹⁶ Beauvoir, 480.

¹¹⁷ Beauvoir, 481; my italics. To demonstrate how older people’s resentments and rebellions might be something more than the unfortunate complaints of malcontents would require setting their experience and relationship to history and to life within the wider philosophical critique of *ressentiment* first waged by Nietzsche’s “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life.” See Nietzsche, “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” 85-168. A first point of contact and contrast with Nietzsche’s position might then be found in Améry, “Resentments,” 62-81.

¹¹⁸ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 481.

¹¹⁹ Beauvoir, 482.

¹²⁰ Beauvoir, 486.

¹²¹ Beauvoir, 486.

¹²² Beauvoir, 491.

¹²³ Beauvoir, 491.

¹²⁴ Beauvoir, 492.

¹²⁵ Beauvoir, 492. Among Beauvoir scholars, it is not uncommon to find questioned the singularity of experiences and insights Beauvoir attributes to the old but which others wish to claim for a wider range of people. For Elisabeth Schäfer, for instance, the sense of time experienced by the old may very well constitute a far more generalizable phenomena in no way exclusive to the old. “Does the experience of time limiting our lives only appear as a phenomenon of old age?”, Schäfer asks, and answers: “Even the young experience time limiting our lives, because it, in fact, marks every act.” Schäfer, “Habit Shifting into Projects,” 103. Like Beauvoir, Améry ultimately rejects such a position and maintains that the irreversibility of time is a phenomenon known only to the old. See Améry, *On Aging*, especially pgs. 13-17.

¹²⁶ Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 542; my italics.

¹²⁷ Beauvoir, 541.

¹²⁸ Beauvoir, 539.

¹²⁹ Beauvoir, 543.

¹³⁰ Beauvoir, 542.

¹³¹ Beauvoir, 543.

¹³² Beauvoir, 543.

¹³³ Beauvoir, 5.

¹³⁴ In *The Coming of Age*, this ‘recogni[tion of] ourselves in this old man or in that old woman’ is also to be found in that process by which one’s mother or father come to represent, as Beauvoir writes, one’s own “reflection in the mirror of the years to come.” Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 5. Strangely, however, the mirror motif otherwise so constant in Beauvoir’s reflections on her own aging is in this book related only to what others see in the mirror but never herself – save for one brief exception (283). In *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir will instead relate mirror scenes deriving, for instance, from such writers as Anacreon (101), Plutarch (112), Ovid (122), Madame de Sévigné (287), Marcel Proust (290), Louis Aragon (292), André Gide (299), Paul Valéry (299), Michelangelo (300, 513), Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (339), Paul Léautaud (341) and Goya (408).

¹³⁵ Beauvoir, 3.

¹³⁶ Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 40.

¹³⁷ See Adorno, *Negativ Dialektik*, 409. For more on the logic of disintegration, see also Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 144-146.

¹³⁸ Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” 132. On Adorno’s notion of ‘last philosophy’ and call for greater philosophical experimentation in the context of contemporary critical theory’s relative inattention to the problem of climate change, see Crawford, “The Reality of Disappearance: Critical Theory and Extinction.”