Sentenced to Life: Autobiography and Aging

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Reading about autobiography, one quickly gets the impression that everything has been thoroughly analyzed already: the "auto" has been torn to pieces, the "graphy" pulled apart, both reflecting the suspiciousness of literary critics such as Derrida, Lejeune, or De Man, and the self-awareness of modern Western writing. Curiously enough, the "bio" didn't get that much attention, which may be due to the dominance of post-structuralist discourses and the uneasiness they display when confronted with the Lacanian "Real." Of course, the question of gender has been raised and the post-colonial impact is at stake. Two approaches that are ever more often chosen, when "life" itself is in question. However, another central characteristic feature of life, and the one that is situated at the core of autobiographical writing itself, has so far hardly ever been the focus of critical analysis: it is the process of aging.

There is no life without aging—at least as far as human beings are concerned—and there is no autobiography without the temporal organization of life. There may be a few autobiographical works that can do without the description of a long period of lifetime, centering instead on a certain, most prominent moment, and endowing this single moment with all the meaning of life. But even then, for the story to fully unfold, the meaning of that particular moment, an account of the time that leads up to that moment, is needed to have a historical background that illuminates the moment in question. However short this account may be (a few words may suffice), it is absolutely vital to the understanding of that central moment in terms of autobiographical information. But take another example: Even if you choose a young protagonist as the hero of your autobiographical writing, you cannot avoid the aging process. Childhood and adolescent life need to be covered, as in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* or J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, and however short these periods may seem in a full life span, their prominent feature is exactly the process of aging, in its early stage of growing up. Childhood and adolescence are in the firm grip of the constructions of time and their institutions of *Bildung*. Kindergarten, school, youth organizations, apprenticeship, and university are all organized in a framework of age and a hierarchy of senior and junior. Contrary to expectations, most autobiographies of adolescence are not written by as youthful a writer as the protagonist may suggest. Elisabeth Ravoux-Rallo has shown in a brilliant analysis of twentieth century adolescent autobiographical writing that there is usually an enormous age gap between the young hero and his old writer, a fatal gap that turns what seems to be an authentic first-hand account into a nostalgic vision or even revision of a past long gone by (Ravoux-Rallo 1989). As we can see, even these autobiographies of youth are dominated by the process of aging.

So far we have been dealing with all kinds of autobiographical writings indiscriminately. There is of course a wide variety of textual organization patterns. There are the different genres such as memoirs, confessions, journals, and diaries.[1] There are the fictitious versions of novels that suggest to their readers some kind of autobiographical dimension, like the relatedness of the story and the author's life well known to the public, or the use of the first-person narrative.[2] There are of course also what you may term pure autobiographies and pure biographies, the difference between which is much more than just the first-person perspective. The reader's response toward autobiographies is organized by Lejeune's famous "autobiographical pact" (see Lejeune 1991): he or she takes the identity of the text's pronoun "I" with the author's name for granted, which then leads the reader to a certain assessment of the story told. There is a high amount of distrust, because however much the reader is willing to believe what is told, he will most naturally have doubts about the author's aim of giving a really truthful picture of himself. This is as much due to the tradition of autobiographical writing stemming from the obviously well-motivated genre of confession as it is due to everyday common sense.

On the other hand, we may well assume something similar concerning biographies: The "biographical pact" clearly differentiates between the text's subject and the text's author. However, as much as this may result in a belief in the exactness of information on the part of the reader, he or she in fact shares the author's fascination for the text's subject. What may seem as an objective third-person account at first sight, turns then into a very subjective, even raving embellishment of the (usually famous) person the text is about. A pact of willing suspense of disbelief–which, too, is staged between the author and the reader. Of course authors have abused the power of these pacts. The most famous example is Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which, while calling itself an autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, pretends to be a biography of Gertrude Stein through the eyes of her friend Toklas, but is in fact an autobiography of Gertrude Stein and a biography about her friend Alice B. Toklas. This fascinating creation of Stein does not only blur the lines between biography and autobiography but also offers a detailed critical analysis of the pacts at stake.

These genres are all very different in kind;[3] however, they all share the process of aging as their fundamental organizing structure. How vital a feature of the "autobiographical" the fragmentation of a lifetime into periods of experience is, can be shown by a fake biography, which makes use of exactly this element in

1 For a detailed analysis, see Wagner-Egelhaaf 2000.

2 Barbara Frey Waxman has made use of this blurring of lines of genre in her analysis of autobiographies of aging, dealing mainly with fictitious accounts and novels. See Waxman 1997.

3 Barbara Johnson and Mary Jacobus both understand autobiography as a monstrous or transgressive genre. See Johnson 1989 and Jacobus 1989.

order to create its camouflage. Wolfgang Hildesheimer has written two fake biographies. One is on Mozart, in which Mozart of course is the historical person, but his biographer, who in that text shares so much detailed information with the famous musician, is a mere invention. Hildesheimer takes great pains to create through the abundant use of data on time, location, and correspondence the effect of a real biography. In his short text *1956 – ein Pilzjahr*, Hildesheimer writes another fictitious biography, a eulogy in commemoration of Gottlieb Theodor Pilz. This time it is a satire, which exposes the construction of the biographic effect and not only makes fun of the genre, but also of a society that relishes the documentation of human ingenuity. In *1956 – ein Pilzjahr*, Hildesheimer again uses precise data to give an account of Pilz's life from birth to death. But this time the given data does not reflect the ingenuity and productivity of the biography's protagonist, but rather shows his mediocrity and failure of success. Pilz's most outstanding quality is not to work and to keep others from working:

> Seine Bedeutung wird heute weit unterschätzt. Das ist nicht verwunderlich. Denn er war weniger ein Schöpfer als ein Dämpfer. Sein Beitrag zur Geschichte der abendländischen Kultur kommt in der Nichtexistenz von Werken zum Ausdruck, Werken, die durch sein mutiges, opferbereites Dazwischentreten niemals entstanden sind. Es ist demnach kein Wunder, daß die Nachwelt, die ja gewohnt ist, die großen Geister nach ihrem Schaffen und nicht nach ihrer Unterlassung zu werten, seiner selten, wenn überhaupt je gedenkt (Hildesheimer 1962: 21).

Hildesheimer's text presents one more element of those that make up the autobiographic effect: there is the definite identification of the first person narrator with the book's author, the abundant use of data and documentation (explicit or implied), the fragmentation of a lifetime into periods of experience (a chronological account or the highlighting of outstanding moments) and the value of the account or the importance of the author. This last point is paramount and should not be underestimated. Autobiographies are written by famous persons, and these persons are usually old. They may be very old, so that they have a lifetime to tell, half a century, three quarters of a century. They may be old in terms of their profession, which accounts for the possibility of an autobiography by a thirty-year old soccer star. Age categorizations of autobiographies depend on the profession in question. If the author is not famous, the subject has to be extraordinary: a remarkable moment in history (a revolution or a coronation), an outstanding deed (military or scientific), an incredible adventure (survival or discovery), a rare experience—such as, for example, very old age or a deadly illness.

How curious that, even though the aging process is at the heart of autobiographical writing, old age is considered as abnormal and rare a phenomenon as a long and vicious disease. Before returning to the main argument that the aging process is a fundamental structure of the autobiographical, we should have a short look at autobiographical writings on old age. This sub-genre of the wide

field of autobiographical writing, in which age is not only the organizing structure but also the main theme, has mushroomed in countries of the West in the last decades, as has the neighboring sub-genre of the description of the experience of long-term serious diseases. A comparison of autobiographical writing on old age with autobiographical writing on long-term illness will help clarify the relationship of both phenomena, and thereby unfold some of the discursive concepts of old age and the politics of ageism that go with them.

In spite of the fact that everybody grows old, *cum grano salis*, while not everybody gets seriously ill, a comparison of old age with fatal disease is not at all surprising. Even at the beginning of the analysis of the phenomenon of aging, theories of illness competed with those of inherent development. There were those theorists who believed in a genetic timetable, that prescribed a certain length of time to any living being, and those who thought of aging as a long-term deterioration of the body comparable in structure to the outbreak of disease, or indeed deeply connected to the overall weakening of an aging body by the accumulation of illnesses through time. Today these gerontological theories have become much more complex:

> Much importance has been placed on the genetic structure of the individual animal or plant species in the various aging theories. It is assumed that aging patterns are present, almost predestined, and that death is a form of planned, programmed self-extinction. […] According to the mutation theory, during the course of aging spontaneous mutations occur in cells, leading to morphological and functional changes. These result in impairment of the cell functions and ultimately affect the whole organism. […] The old "wear and tear" theory is based on the concept that in each organism there is a finite reserve of energy which cannot be replaced. When this reserve is exhausted, degeneration and death ensue (de Nicola 1989: 6-9).

Both autobiographical writing on old age and autobiographical writing on disease share a common history in the Western world. Both are very new subgenres, not even a century old. According to Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, a pioneer in the research on illness narratives, "as a genre, pathography is remarkable in that it seems to have emerged *ex nihilo*; book-length personal accounts of illness are uncommon before 1950 and rarely found before 1900" (Hawkins 1993: 3). This obsession with illness–and the same holds true for old age–may seem strange at first sight, since exactly these years have witnessed an unprecedented boost in medical technology and the celebration of health food, diets, fitness clubs, wellness, and Gray Panther movements. However, G. Thomas Couser sees no contradiction in these parallel developments (Couser 1997). He argues in his book on autopathography that it was exactly this unexpected jump in medicine that triggered off an outbreak of disappointment, once it became clear that nevertheless medicine could neither defeat the major fatal diseases nor do away with the predicaments of old age. The idolization of good health and brisk old age has ousted those who do not fit in: the disabled, the ill, and the senile. Hawkins denounces the witch-hunt that has reprimanded those inflicted. They are consid-

ered responsible for incurring their illness through wrong lifestyle or unbalanced psychological behavior. As far as curable illnesses are concerned, they are also made responsible for their recovery (Hawkins 1993: 129).

Both the ill and the old, it seems, were forced by society to account for their predicament, while at the same time the intense experience of bodily and mental change stimulated a stronger awareness of death and pain and of the breakdown of identity constructs and life plans. But not all who were afflicted set out to write and publish about their new experience. In his analysis of narratives of illness, Couser comes to the interesting conclusion that most of the books on illness in the United States are written by white middle class authors. And that these authors usually had prior writing experience. Again, autobiographical writers on old age also usually have an earlier writing record. But it is not only a question of social status. That same tantalizing experience that triggered off the new interest in autobiography of the person concerned may very well hinder its fulfillment: health conditions may become so bad that continuous writing, which is necessary for a full fledged account, becomes impossible. There is a natural limit to writing about one's illness or old age.

Couser is interested in what he names "autopathography," autobiographical writing about long-term illnesses that become more than a passing experience. Long lasting dysfunctions, whether caused by illness or by old age, have to be lived with. Life has to be remodeled according to the new conditions posed, and this will lead to new and different ways of life, and consequently to new and different stories of life.

> More generally, however, life writing about illness and disability promises to illuminate the relations among body, mind, and soul; indeed, it is significant not just because it represents a relatively new category of life stories but also because it promises to foreground somatic experience in a new way by treating the body's form and function (apart from race or gender) as fundamental constituents of identity. The effects of disease on identity and self-perception may be most fundamental and troubling in the case of mental illness. However, some physical ailments may radically undermine a patient's sense of self. […] When illness and disability forground the body in this way, life writing has a new opportunity to explore the ways in which the body mediates identity or personality (Couser: 1997. 12f).

Couser is especially concerned with identity politics. The autopathographies that he reads aim at the destigmatization of illness and disability. They show and denounce the stereotypes and prejudice the old and the ill are exposed to. At the same time, they serve as identification molds, when it comes to those categories of illness that are connected to certain groups, like AIDS, breast cancer, or senility and old age.

But there is another aspect to these attempts at writing about one's own new disabled life. There is a "life text" prior to the autobiographical endeavors of the inflicted person. Part and parcel of the medical and psychological treatment of ill and old patients is a narrative collaboration between the doctor and the patient:

> Diagnosis often relies at least in part on a medical history; the patient offers up testimony that the doctor interprets according to codes and conventions generally unavailable to the patient. In order to be treated, then, patients generally must have their medical history "taken." In diagnosis doctors provide patients with an interpretation of their lives–and act that, regardless of what follows, may at least make sense of a baffling past. Diagnosis leads in turn to prescription, treatment, and prognosis, all of which extend physicians' authority over patients' lives. Thus doctors may both reinterpret patients' pasts and literally pre-script their futures. The process is collaborative but one sided; patients submit their bodies to tests, their life histories to scrutiny, while doctors retain the authority to interpret these data (Couser 1997: 10).

Although from the medical point of view this is very helpful and desirable, from the patient's point of view it means the relinquishing of control over his or her body and life story. Autopathographies serve as platforms for patients to challenge this medical usurpation and to invent and elaborate their own, personal views of how their lives are changing. Elaine Scarry has long pointed out how difficult it is to find an adequate vocabulary of pain and illness (Scarry 1985). Insofar, these autopathographies can be regarded as demanding poetic and inventive projects. Medical history records are restricted to medical discourse only; they leave their patients' feelings, fears, fantasies, and sensations out of account. This opposition towards medical and psychological authority, as well as social stereotyping, can be interpreted in terms of post-colonialism and postmodernity. In post-colonialist theory the subaltern subject is seeking to speak up for him- or herself and to enforce his or her own representation, rather than merely being subjected to the master discourses.

> The post-colonial stance of these stories resides not in the content of what they say about medicine. Rather the new feel of these stories begins in how often medicine and physicians do not enter their stories. Postmodern illness stories are told so that people can place themselves outside "the unifying general view." For people to move their stories outside the professional purview involves a profound assumption of personal responsibility. […] [In] the remission society, the post-colonial ill person takes responsibility for what illness means in his life (Frank 1995: 13).

A typical example for this attempt at reclaiming one's own life[4] is May Sarton's *At Seventy* (Sarton 1984). Despite several setbacks, this is a thoroughly positive account of growing old. Although Sarton is occasionally troubled by her old age, her looks, her bodily shortcomings, and so forth, she tries to create a positive image of herself at the age of seventy. Her success is widely due to her resilient attempts at keeping herself busy: with gardening as a time-consuming hobby and the company of very diverse friends, including those not only younger but those older than herself as well, and thus give her not only the feeling of being old but also of being young. She is also clever enough not to oversee the advantages of old age: she feels much less committed, troubled, and stressed than she did in

4 For identity politics and old age autobiographies, see Waxman 1997.

her younger years and experiences some kind of old-age freedom. But the main reasons why she can give such a positive picture of herself lie in the simple fact that she is not yet too old to really suffer from the diverse inflictions of very old age, and in the genre she has chosen to write in. Sarton is not writing an autobiography or memoir, but a journal with almost daily entries. The journal as genre however underlies very different time structures than the classical autobiography; it deals with the moment, it does not look back, but intensifies the very moment of existence, thus undermining the wearisome experience of an accumulating past, which is rather typical of the genre of the classical autobiography.

Autobiographical writings like the journal or diary differ in their focus on time structure immensely from those texts which are more concerned with recreating the past, and therefore more involved with the dynamics of memory. The everyday entry of a journal calls to mind the very essence of growing old: a constant irreversible change in life. The most basic feature of growing old is its irreversibility. Growth only knows one direction, and there is no possibility of returning to an older, or for that matter, younger phase in life. However, growing old is not a clearly defined and predetermined process. There are many different ways of growing old, and so far it is impossible to predict them. A sixty-year old person may feel, and be objectively defined as younger than a fifty-year old person. Age boundaries are no measuring rod when it comes to growing old. For that very reason, gerontologists try to conduct longevity surveys; to measure the change of growth within a given individual. Of course these surveys are based on long-term observations as well as subjective information and memory capacity and are therefore rather rare and vulnerable to misinterpretation. Yet the close link between the process of growing old and personal development is also reflected in gerontological theorization. Many theories on aging use biographical interpretations and categorizations. Erikson's and Havighurst's are amongst the most prominent and influential. Following their approach, one can easily identify the process of growing old with biography itself. And that also explains why so many biographical and autobiographical texts follow the structure of aging in their account of human life.[5]

Simone de Beauvoir's four-volume autobiography offers an excellent example to explain the organizing structure of aging for the autobiographical. Her critical insight as the gender-concerned, not to say feminist, author of *Le Deuxième Sexe* and her existentialist inquiry into the meaning of old age in *La Vieillesse* make her an ideal autobiographer for our purpose. As a young feminist, she sets out with her autobiographical project by outlining a critical development of a woman's way of *Bildung*. Rejecting the "normal" biography of a young woman,

[5] For more information on gerontology, see Lehr 2000. Gerontology is a most international and cooperative discipline, and therefore it is very easy to get access to almost any text in most languages.

love, marriage and motherhood, which unavoidably leads to dependence on others, especially men, she endeavors on an independent "male" biography and welcomes praise which compares her abilities to those of the male sex, instead of indulging in her female attractiveness.

> By the time she entered adolescence she began to plan for a different kind of womanhood from that of her mother and other women relatives. The changes in the family situation and the changes in her pubescent body coincided and convinced her that her life would be a constant struggle to impose her own standards of perfection and permanence when she became a woman (Ladimer 1999: 98).

Her existentialist philosophy enables her to face her fears of old age, to relentlessly name the agony that dominates most of her years as a grown-up, post-adolescent person. But that same existentialist philosophy is also responsible for her rejection of old age, as will be shown later. Quite contrary to May Sarton's attempt at envisioning alternative concepts, Beauvoir remains in the discursive realm of classical old age, especially in her polarizations of future and past, youth and old age.

> Qui vois je? Vieillir c'est se définir et se réduire. Je me suis débattue contre les étiquettes; mais je n'ai pas pu empêcher les années de m'emprisonner. J'habiterai longtemps ce décor où ma vie s'est déposée; je resterai fidèle aux amitiés anciennes; le stock de mes souvenirs, même s'il s'enrichit un peu, demeurera. J'ai écrit certains livres, pas d'autres. Quelque chose, à ce propos, me déconcerte. J'ai vécu tendue vers l'avenir et, maintenant, je me récapitule, au passé: on dirait que le présent a été escamoté. J'ai pensé pendant des années que mon oeuvre était devant moi, et voilà qu'elle est derrière: à aucun moment elle n'a eu lieu (de Beauvoir 1963: 683).

On the last pages of the third volume of her autobiography, *La Force des Choses*, she meets her sudden awareness of having aged considerably with an outcry of dismay. In 1963, Simone de Beauvoir is only fifty-five years old:

> A ces mutilations, qui sont l'envers de mes chances, il s'en ajoute une autre à laquelle je ne trouve aucune compensation. Ce qui m'est arrivé de plus important, de plus irréparable depuis 1944, c'est que […] j'ai vieilli. Cela signifie beaucoup de choses. Et d'abord que le monde autour de moi a changé: il s'est rapetissé et amenuisé. Je n'oublie plus que la surface de la terre est finie, fini le nombre de ses habitants, des essences végétales, des espèces animales, et aussi celui des tableaux, des livres, des monuments qui s'y sont déposés. Chaque élément s'explique par cet ensemble et ne renvoie qu'à lui: sa richesse aussi est limitée. Jeunes, nous rencontrions souvent, Sartre et moi, des "individualités au-dessus de la nôtre," c'es-à-dire qui résistaient à l'analyse, retenant à nos yeux un peu du merveilleux de l'enfance. Ce noyau de mystère s'est dissous: le pittoresque est mort, les fous ne me semblent plus sacrés, les foules ne m'enivrent plus; la jeunesse, jadis fascinante, je n'y vois plus que le prélude à la maturité. La réalité m'intéresse encore, mais sa présence ne me foudroie plus. Certes la beauté demeure; bien qu'elle ne m'apporte plus de révélation stupéfiante, bien que la plupart de ses secrets soient éventés il arrive encore qu'elle arrête le temps. Souvent aussi je la déteste (de Beauvoir 1963: 681f).

Her personal experience of old age as it is represented in her autobiographical books is reinforced by her scientific analysis of the construction of discourses of

old age in *La Vieillesse*. This second large sociological and cultural study of Beauvoir is in structure quite similar to her first: old age is analyzed not merely as an important aspect but as an essential element of the *conditio humana*–as was gender in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. A general and historical analysis of myths and topoi is followed by a critical collection of the more subjective experience of old age by historical personalities as well as (in a more generalized version) by social groups. *La Vieillesse* can also be considered as a study in identity politics:

> Toute situation humaine peut être envisagée en extériorité–telle qu'elle se présente à autrui–et en intériorité, en tant que le sujet l'assume en la dépassant. Pour autrui, le vieillard est l'objet d'un savoir; pour soi, il a de son état une experience vécue. Dans la première partie de ce livre, j'adopterai le premier point de vue. J'examinerai ce que la biologie, l'anthropologie, l'histoire, la sociologie contemporaine nous enseignent sur la vieillesse. Dans la seconde, je m'efforcerai de décrire la manière don't l'homme âgé intériorise son rapport à son corps, au temps, à autrui. Aucune de ces deux enquêtes ne nous permettra de définir la vieillesse; nous constaterons au contraire qu'elle prend une multiplicité de visages, irréductibles les uns aux autres. Au cours de l'histoire comme aujourd'hui la lutte des classes commande la manière don't un homme est saisi par sa vieillesse; un abîme sépare le vieil esclave et le vieil eupatride, un ancien ouvrier miserablement pensionné et un Onassis. La différenciation des vieillesses individuelles a d'autres causes encore: santé, famille, etc. Mais ce sont deux categories de vieillards, l'une extrêmement vaste, l'autre réduite à une petite minorité, que crée l'opposition des exploiteurs et des exploités. Toute allegation qui prétend concerner la vieillesse en général doit être récusée parce qu'elle tend à masquer cet hiatus (de Beauvoir 1970: 16 f).

Beauvoir wants to unmask the lies and clichés of bourgeois culture concerning old age. Again, as in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, the subject of her treatise becomes the constructed "other" of discourse: "Les mythes et les clichés mis en circulation par la pensée bourgoise s'attachent à montrer dans le vieillard un *autre*" (de Beauvoir 1970: 9). In Beauvoir's analysis, old age becomes "the other" of life. The human being will not accept its unavoidable destiny. A voice within declares absurdly that this will never happen. Others may grow old, not oneself (de Beauvoir 1970: 11). But her idea is neither to beautify old age nor to form positive alternative concepts. It is Beauvoir's interest to revise the meaning of aging. And as a philosopher, she returns to the existentialist concepts of being and time, following Sartre's *L'Etre et le Néant*. To exist as a human being then is a constant challenge of redefining one's self in time. Existentialists are not interested in origin or the past. They fervently embrace the future as the possibility of living out one's own perspectives of being. Consequently, they adore youth, with which they associate activity and the future (transcendence), and abhor old age, with which they associate a passive past (immanence).

> Exister, pour la réalité humaine, c'est se temporaliser: au présent nous visons l'avenir par des projets qui dépassent notre passé où nos activités retombent, figées et chargées d'exigences inertes. L'âge modifie notre rapport au temps; au fil des années, notre avenir se raccourcit tandis que notre passé s'alourdit. On peut définer le vieillard comme un individu qui a une longue vie derrière lui et devant lui une espérance de survie très limi-

> tée. Les consequences de ces changements se répercutent les unes sur les autres pour engendrer une situation, variable selon l'histoire antérieure de l'individu, mais dont on peut dégager des constantes (de Beauvoir 1970: 383).

Unfortunately, Beauvoir follows Sartre's discursive dichotomy of youth and future vs. old age and past. – A blunt generalization that does not take into account how little young people are concerned with their future, and how powerfully old people through their much broader experience of life and time can refigure their future, as short as it may be. And unfortunately she also follows Sartre in a second discursive nexus of future and volition. Sartre has no concept of a future that is not planned. The existentialist's quest is to master and direct one's future. There is no space in Sartre's theory for a future that befalls the subject as does an illness or old age. Thus Beauvoir cannot see anything positive in old age. She does not adhere to Sartre in his attempt to formulate an abstract concept of time that leaves out the living factor of aging: of course, theoretically, future always becomes past, as Sartre argues. But this concept does not take into account the subject's body and spirit growing old:

> Sartre a expliqué ce décalage dans L'Etre et le Néant: "Le futur ne se laisse pas rejoindre, il glisse au passé comme ancien futur ... De là cette déception ontologique qui attend le Pour-soi à chaque débouché dans le futur. Même si mon présent est rigoureusement identique par son contenu au futur vers quoi je me projetais par-delà l'être, ce n'est pas ce présent vers quoi je me projetais car je me projetais vers ce futur en tant que futur, c'est-à-dire en tant que point de rejoignement de mon être" (de Beauvoir 1970: 390).

The older a person grows, the vaster his past becomes. And because Beauvoir argues that it is the past that defines the present, and with the present, the present's aspirations for the future, a huge past will weigh down these aspirations and lead to the passivity so typical of very old people (de Beauvoir 1970: 395). There is no escaping one's past, certainly not by growing older and living longer. At a given point in time, the human being's past will finally catch up with its future.

> Pour S. de Beauvoir, la vieillesse signifie l'ingérence de la mort au coeur de la vie même. L'angoisse face à la vieillesse est donc bien l'angoisse face à la mort: la vieillesse implique la défaite de la vie en tant qu'elle se révèle une entreprise solitaire, et le triomphe du néant, la découverte de gouffre béant que, depuis l'enfance, Simone recouvrait de branchages (Halpern-Guedj 1998: 112).

Betty Halpern-Guedj is aware of the existentialist meaning the concept "growing old" has in Beauvoir's thinking. However, her mere identification of old age and death falls short of a recognition of the utterly diverse structures of, and therefore effects that these two concepts have on human life. Because death, as much as it may be the other of life, does nothing but destroy life. What is the importance of future and aspirations once you're dead? Old age has a much more devastating effect on life, because it destroys the meaning of future and aspirations while you keep on living. More so, it enhances the stifling factor of a past lived

while you're still yearning for a future, a promised land, that you will never reach. And because of this argumentation, Beauvoir can come to the conclusion that old age is the one mode of existence that expresses adequately the *conditio humana* from an existentialist point of view:

> La vieillesse n'apparaît pas, chez Ionesco, chez Beckett comme la limite extrême de la condition humaine mais, comme dans Le Roi Lear, elle est cette condition même enfin démasquée (de Beauvoir 1970: 226).

Whereas the "non-old" individual, the "young," denies the otherness of old age and rejects any contingency, making old age a taboo, the older subject tries to defy the looming shadow of old age, while it is steadily growing. There is a desperate fight for closure of the self, which is especially well reflected in the autobiographical project. By writing one's past with the intention of closure, the older person tries to escape a future that he or she believes is either non-existent or not worth living. De Man's tropos of "epitaphic" (de Man 1979) is an excellent image for this constellation. However, it should be governed by old age and not by death. The autobiographical trick, as de Man would argue, to posit a face and voice that speaks to us as if from beyond the grave, is the last resort of faked closure. Curious that both de Man and Derrida follow this false lead instead of deconstructing what is at stake in the autobiographical: the screening of despicable old age by the well-known self-indulgent discourse of death that is far less devastating to the human subject than growing old is. Derrida's at the same time quite ironic and yet very typical attempt of turning autobiography into "thanatographie" (Derrida 1982) by playing off the written text against the living subject also avoids any recognition of the meaning of old age for the autobiographical. Like de Man, he makes use of a rhetorical shortcut that turns the living author of an autobiography into a dead specter. Of course, one intention of writing an autobiography may be to become immortal–a very traditional rhetorical argument. Yet the author of an autobiography is not simply dead, his relationship to his writing is much more complicated. To say that he is old leaves more space to contemplate this relationship. As an old person the autobiographic author on the one hand tries to gain closure through telling and naming his past, while on the other hand the subject of his text falls to pieces. Still alive, he is faced with the fragmentated state of his selfhood. A mode of being that of course appeals to both Derrida and de Man, and concurs with their own findings. But in order to grasp the devastating effect of this realization, you need a living author, suffering at the sight of his own fragmentation of selfhood, like Simone de Beauvoir: "Je n'arrive pas à y croire. Quand je lis imprimé: Simone de Beauvoir, on me parle d'une jeune femme qui est moi" (de Beauvoir 1963: 684). The whole problematic of fragmentated selfhood lies in this little word "est": old age means *to be* and at the same time *to have been*. Identity becomes temporary. So much so that the autobiographic "I" that is supposed to govern the autobiographical pact, is subjected to metamorphosis:

> A 20 ans, à 40 ans, me penser vieille, c'est me penser autre. Il y a quelque chose d'effrayant dans toute metamorphose. J'étais stupéfaite, enfant, et même angoissée quand je réalisais qu'un jour je me changerais en grande personne. Mais le désir de demeurer soi-même est généralement compensé dans le jeune âge par les considérables avantages du statut d'adulte. Tandis que la vieillesse apparaît comme une disgrâce (de Beauvoir 1970: 11).

But where does that leave the autobiographical project? What becomes of the autobiographical "I" and its pact with the reader, when metamorphosis comes into play?

What is at stake then in the autobiographical is an attempt at closure of selfhood triggered by the discursive unacceptability of old age, an attempt that belies itself by revealing at the same time the fragmentation of a personal identity that the aging author is steadily outgrowing.

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