

REALITY AND IMAGE OF THE AGEING

Introduction

Society gives us a multiplied
Over and above the always
and above the objective
and loss of strength, over
tells us about ageing, then
that the poet Eugénio de
ageing of the roses:

*They emerge
Silent, reserved
to exist. Admitted
(...)*

In their heart

*was not so small and what they did
didn't appear to them as humiliation.*

*They knew how to grow old with the slow
light of the children*

and of the animals of the home.

Alongside with the rose.

1. Personal identity at old age

Maybe it is only when we grow old ourselves that we are able to understand the astonishing intuition of the young Rimbaud when he wrote: "I is another" ("Je est un autre").

At stake in that sentence there is the fundamental and structural question of the personal identity. We have lived most of our lives within the paradigm of the linear progress of science and history. No wonder then that our understanding of the evolution of the human person has been grounded too on that paradigm. Hence the generalized conviction that the "I" is building and affirming itself, getting more and more solid as if it would move towards a flawless unity.

Things are not that simple, however. As time goes by, we notice a distinction between the "I" whose inner unity shapes us as responsible human beings and "another" which appears alien to the "I". Getting old is the rupture which happens at that moment. It is the space where the "I" and the "another" of ourselves appear intensely – and for most of us painfully – as if they would be dissociated. Why? People around us see "another" (you have become so thin!... You had such a good memory!... you are so different!...) while we see the same "I".

Maybe there lies the reason for the solitude of the old, regardless and beyond the social need for their full integration in the human communities, from the family to the different segments of society of which we have been a part

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throughout our life. Maybe the solitude of the old is the result of the unavoidable separation between that "another the others see" and "the one I see".

I don't deny that there are elements and pillars of our identity which accompany us throughout our lives. But even those elements can be shaken. Two examples. First a very material one: our genetic code which is known to be permanent. But isn't it true that the genetic code can be observed from outside as if it would belong to another? Secondly, we could also speak about the psychic structure. But isn't it true that such a structure can also be observed from the outside, seen as the 'film' of relationships? (how often we comment about the 'story' told by somebody we know since a long time: "well! I know that old film already...")

Simone de Beauvoir in her still extraordinary book on "Old age" ("La vieillesse") states clearly that "*the problematics of personal identity is the continuous search for an unalterable way of relating to the other*". Paradoxically, old age does not clarify it. Long before contemporary post-modernism came to fragment all knowledge and all ways of relating to everything, old people had already "understood" that time, instead of unifying, is a factor of disassembling, of getting distance. Isn't it familiar to us the astonishment when we read what we have written long ago: "Who is that person who wrote that, who thought that?!"

Indeed, time is a threat to identity. The only way to face it is to stand firm on the principle of permanence in time. In Portuguese a popular saying says, though negatively, that permanence: "a person who weaves a basket weaves a hundred" ("Cesteiro que faz um cesto faz um cento!"). In today's culture we find the same idea that the person remains the same for instance in the movies by Woody Allen which seem to be saying always the same thing. It is the "principle of repetition" – a basic principle of psychoanalysis – echoing the lines of Psalm 50: "...and my sin is ever before me" (I don't understand the psalmist referring to a concrete act but to the psychic attitude of the human person who repeats endlessly her own inner structure.)

2. The unexpected character of old age

One of the most striking elements of old age is surprise. Somebody we have not seen for quite a time and is not a very intimate friend exclaims: "But you **still** look very well!" Of course when we were younger nobody would say that, it wouldn't make sense! Though we know our age and the cracks in our appearance such an exclamation comes always as a surprise. Goethe speaking of old age has a very good sentence:

"Age takes hold of us by surprise."

How often when we meet old schoolmates whom we had not seen since childhood or youth we suddenly see real old people in front of us and a sense of looking into a mirror is there. Then we are surprised not only at the changes in the person before us but at the recognition of the equivocal changes in ourselves. Proust expresses that surprise in the following way:



"...for the first time I realized through the metamorphoses that had taken place in people that time had gone through them and what has shaken me profoundly was the revelation that time had gone through me too."

For some persons this is what Simone de Beauvoir calls "an intellectual scandal" as it is so difficult to understand that this picture of ourselves that comes from outside is compatible with the "I" that we feel still so similar to the child of long ago.

We find ourselves caught in between two extremes: on one side, an exaggerated juvenility which tries to deny the obvious reality of ageing; on the other side, a condescendence with ourselves using old age as an alibi for lessening all the demands from life.

3, Old age as acting a role

This leads us to the idea of life as acting a role. André Gide said it in a very clear way:

"My soul has remained so young that it seems to me always that the septuagenarian I undoubtedly am is a role that I take upon me; and the diseases, the flaws that come upon me to remind me of my age are coming to put it back in my memory when I have the temptation to forget that reality. Then, as the good actor I want to be I enter into my role and do my utmost to play it well. But it would be so much more natural to abandon myself to the spring that is coming; simply I feel that I don't have anymore the garments proper to such abandonnement."

This idea of playing a role is also an element of the reason behind the endless self-portraits done by most painters. To look at those done at the end of the painters' lives is a revelation also about ourselves. Try to find the last self-portrait of Leonardo Da Vinci: you will see the splendour and the achievement of old age, you will see a man in the climax of his intellectual strength, beyond sadness or joy. Do the same with Rembrandt: there we see that he too has reached the fullness of life but somehow in him some special smile seems to ask "so what?" They certainly looked at the "role" they played in a different way.

Doesn't it also happen with each one of us? The older we become the more unique appears to each one of us our own life.

4. Old age: the gift received and the gift left to others after us

However frail old age may appear we still have ideas, dreams, projects. Something from our first enchantment with life is there, maybe less obvious to the others but stronger in ourselves. I quote Proust again:

"If I didn't tell my age to myself I wouldn't feel it. Even when I repeat as a lesson learnt by heart 'I am over 65', I find it difficult to convince myself that it is true. It is so narrow the space where my desires and my joy, my virtues and my will may still hope to enlarge themselves. And strangely enough they never were so demanding."



*And between four solid walls
Of deep and consumed solitude
Somebody will take as her own self
The poem in the time*



Adaptation - and (bad !) translation of the poems included – of a short version of a lecture I gave in a seminar of the National Council of Bio-ethics in November '99 at a national celebration of the year of the ageing
As a sign of my presence and my companionship with all of you!

Yours in the same search and trust that our poem will be read by
generations to come

Maria de Lourdes

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