

# Living the Ageing

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Ageing is basically a natural or physical phenomenon. For a human being, it belongs to the body. When this fact is noticed, a drama of oldness and life/death begins: ageing is a problem of experience. There are losses and gains in this experience. Indeed, a particular respect was paid to a rhapsodist/bard and a hermit because of their memory power and deep wisdom respectively. Since we recognize in these cases accumulation and maturation, the core subject in the experience of ageing is memory and the time structure. Vis-à-vis the hard memories such as stone monuments and IC memory, the live memory is characterised by a creativity, which vivifies our past time. I pay a particular attention to friendship, because one of the most painful experiences of ageing consists in the loss of dear friends. Recollecting creatively the time shared with them, we can vivify our past, i.e. our being: that is the appropriation of ourselves. | *Keywords: Memory, Friendship, Stone monument, Time structure, Creative recollection, Aappropriation, The second/third mirror stage*

Aging has several faces. A society can be aged, which presents political problems such as social security, pension and balancing the responsibility of different generations. The ways of coping with these serious problems vary from culture to culture: this is the folkloric aspect of ageing. The problems peculiar to ageing include, among others, physiological and medical matters. We can also investigate the history of the notion of ageing. And so on.

My subject, however, is different. I'll concentrate here on a description of what I am experiencing as ageing particularly in terms of the loss of friends. I think this subject is important, because, as I'll point out later, unnoticed the ageing process is not worth being considered as ageing for our life. So, the basis of the following description is personal, but I believe many people share my experience. The main theme is memory, which has long been regarded as a substantial phenomenon of ageing in a good sense as well as bad one. This shall be developed into a reflection of the time structure of the consciousness of old people. Special attention will be paid to the meaning of friendship -because friendship helps us in order to live well our own ageing.

To begin, I wish to recall the very basis of ageing. Most often 'ageing' means 'growing old'. Literally, however, it signifies more neutrally 'time lapsing'.

Thus, ageing is first of all a natural phenomenon. A used tin can thrown into a street gutter or a bike left in the open-air rusts steadily. Rusting comes from the iron in the tin can or bike's body bonding with the oxygen in the air or water (rain). Concerning a corpse or the remains of a living thing, the lapsed time of the regular disintegration of radiocarbon is known, and that is used to determine its age. Natural ageing then is a temporal phenomenon, progressing regularly and in one direction only. This notion is the starting point of my reflection.

### 1. Ageing of Live Matter

Among the natural phenomena, the ageing of live or organic matter goes a little bit differently. Live matter is formed from a material body and a non-material function. Ageing belongs to its natural part, the body. We can consider that the ageing of an organism is caused by rust too ("the body rusts"). Oxygen burns and exhausts life. Simone de Beauvoir says: "it seems that from the very beginning every organism contains its old age, the inevitable consequence of its full completion" (*Old Age*, translated by Patrick O'Brian, 1985; original: *La Vieillesse*, 1970. Hereafter I borrow some data from this *summa gerontologica*). This inclusion of old age is a condition of evolution. If the individual lived for ever, there would be no change in life's phenomena. (Under the hypothesis of an individual with eternal life, I wonder what can the extreme expansion of the soul of this eternal being be. There may have been an SF writer who deliberated about this.) Because one individual dies out and is replaced by another new one, variance becomes possible to open the way of evolution. In the case of an advanced creature like a human being of which the spirit is accompanied with consciousness, the ageing arriving at death is coloured with a nuance of fate and weighs heavily on consciousness. If there were a pure spirit or soul, we could not recognize any ageing in it. Therefore, many philosophers have come to think of the immortality of the pure spirit or soul.

The ageing of a human body does not go in any straightforward way. In the course of life, there is a growth period which attains an acme, and after enjoying its full bloom, we enter into its twilight. Similarly, the mature wine or whisky is a stage of growth, which must have its peak: a wine of 100 years old may have deteriorated. Literally, growth is an ageing process too, but we don't call it so for ageing is linked with the old age. The reason for not calling growth ageing is that physical decline is a grave concern for consciousness.

Consciousness itself does not change: one is one, and blue is still blue. But consciousness cannot but suffer a certain deterioration of function. Spheres of action become narrower and we have less chance of getting new stimulation from the external world. Accordingly, the acts of consciousness become duller and are accompanied with a feeling of fatigue. Old age is the state of advanced ageing, and ageing is this process: it is an old age in the present progressive form.

Talking about the ageing of human beings endowed with reflective consciousness, is to consider their experience of time. Indeed, there is so-

called ageing of spirit, but for the moment I take this as a reflection of physical ageing on the spirit (I'll mention later the mature steps).

One person is given a robust body, and another a weak one; there is an insensitive body on the one hand, and a delicate one on the other. Therefore, ageing differs from person to person. That is the case with the fact of the decline of physical ability as well as with its awareness. When B. Berenson, the art historian, said "What a man writes after he is sixty is worth little more than tea continually remade with the same leaves," he was thinking about the whole deterioration of body and mind. (His opinion itself does not agree with my own experience: I feel I became capable of writing something better after sixty. Of course, this might be a delusion because of my own ageing). World Health Organization defines, it seems, old age as the age of someone older than 65, and in Japan, my country, the growth stage after 75 is called later old age. Such definite classifications do not necessarily agree with the consciousness and experience of everyone. They might even determine every person's self-image, as in the case expressed in the complaint: 'Ah, I am finally a later old man/woman!'

## 2. Consciousness and Recognition of Ageing

Ageing is inseparable from its acknowledgment. An oldness that is unrecognised cannot even be called ageing. Consciousness does not know any ageing. Gide writes in his diary: "I have to make a great effort to convince myself that I am at present as old as those who seemed to me so ancient when I was young". The reason is that his consciousness has not grown old and stays young. The case is the same when we hardly identify ourselves in the old man's or woman's image in the mirror. This is so to speak the second mirror stage, and after that comes the third, where one finds it difficult to consider a photograph of oneself taken in one's younger days as truly representing oneself. In Gide's case as well as in that of our mirror image, the gap between the constancy of consciousness and the changing body produces a psychological conflict. Recognition of one's own ageing consists in taking the bodily change as one's whole state. After overcoming the Gidian consciousness of the gap between body and mind and accepting the reality as one's own ageing, we can say, our old age begins. An old man or woman is someone who has lived long, but the standard of such a length differs from culture to culture, from condition to condition.

Deterioration is not the whole. An old person has accumulated during his or her long life a rich store of experience and knowledge which can contribute to his or her maturity. The Taoist ideal of the hermit consists in attaining a god-like state through a certain longevity. There was a folk tradition in China according to which Lao-tze lived through 100 years to attain the state of 'true man' (真人). A hermit must have gone beyond the consciousness of aging, but we regard him as a long white-haired old man. This means that longevity can be related to wisdom. Whereas a Taoist hermit attains the ideal state through a practice such as meditation, ordinary people of the world also can mature in their own ways. Thus, white hair is taken most often as a symbol of maturity. An old person in a great shape can be respected especially because of his or her age.

It is remarkable that exceptional memory often grants old people an advantage in their society. Beauvoir says “old people acquire a high, privileged status because of their memories” in uncivilised societies. *The Dream of Ossian* is a masterpiece of Dominique Ingres, now a treasure of the museum of his hometown, Montauban. In the foreground is found Ossian sleeping, leaning over his harp. Though his face is hidden by his arm, his hair is white. Behind are painted in a whitish colour characters appearing in his dream. Among them are some bards. In particular the central figure, leaning on a stick for his journey, his harp on his feet, wears long white hair and beard. A poet is someone who keeps and hands down the memory of a tribe’s history, and his length of life and memory of rich experiences guarantee his authority. A robust old man with white hair seems standard for the iconography of bards or rhapsodists (cf. *Ossian*, Exhibition Catalogue, Paris, 1974).

### 3. Human Memory and Hard Memory

While the memory of bards or rhapsodists is an exceptional ability, that of ordinary people is defective and failure of recollection is usual. Coming to my bookshelf, I have already forgotten what I had looked forward to finding there: I repeat such an embarrassment in my daily life. When we find human memory unreliable, a stone monument is constructed.

In 2011, the pacific seaside of the Northeast District of Japan was stricken by a huge tsunami after a massive earthquake, and more than 18,000 people were killed or missing. The unimaginable power of a tsunami was visually transmitted through television on a real-time basis, and shock waves passed throughout the world. Geographically, this region had been stricken several times by big tsunamis. In the modern era only, more than 20,000 people in 1896 and more than 2,000 in 1933 were killed or missed, and every time many warning stone monuments were constructed in various places.

“After a big earthquake, be cautious of a tsunami”, or “when the tide goes abruptly out, ring an alarm bell”, etc.: on each stone monument a short but pressing alert was inscribed. We find also one telling a story, which shows a feeling of impatience: “Don’t construct a house below this spot. In 1896 as well as 1933, the waves arrived here to demolish the village, so that only two people in the former case and four in the latter could survive. Even after many years passed, be cautious”. This stone document is placed, they say, at a spot 60 metres above sea level, 800 metres from the seashore, and from that place we cannot even see the sea.

Of course, this warning did not reach the people of later generations, so they constructed houses ‘below’ and met with the disaster of 2011. This was the result of a consideration balancing the comfort of life against a rough calculation of the probability of disaster. Since people had lost freshness in their memories, they gave a lower estimate of danger. The fact that people ‘considered’ means that they already had lost the importance of some of their ancestral traditions. It is a problem of the weakness of intellect itself.

A stone document is an instance of hard media. People who experienced such a disaster will not forget it. But with years, the zeal for transmission will

diminish in the later generations. As to the recording of facts, computer memory is the strongest medium. We experience very often that this 'memory' corrects our memory. But just as it is indispensable that the stone document be read and that we have to get access to the hard memory of computers in order to make use of them, so too in this step intervene the human way of life and the function of intellection.

To inscribe not only facts but also a story on a stone document is a means to have posterity read it: it is the turn of literature. Shin Hasegawa, the great Japanese writer of popular literature called his own works (such as historical or biographical novels and dramas) "stone documents in paper (紙碑)", and was proud of paper's power of transmission, which is greater than that of stone documents. He considered that the real problem is the effective communication that does not consist in the hardness of media. If we attribute to the story the real effect of communication, we should reconsider the work itself of an aged poet which does not concern a simple record: it was necessary for it to become an epic. Telling stories, he transmitted the past events of the tribe to his fellow countrymen. Respect for him is certainly based on his outstanding memory capacity. But this memory is not a hard memory, and his chant is not voiced in an AI voice.

If we ask for literal exactitude, soft memory cannot rival with hard one. Besides, hard memory as in the Rosetta stone was rare in ancient times. It is indispensable to ask the real nature of poet's memory in order to elucidate the ageing experience. But as we have seen, lived ageing is interwoven with accumulation and loss (deterioration). The wisdom of ageing consists in how to manage these changes, and we find the key for this management in the mechanisms of memory and recollection.

#### 4. Creativity of Memory

It is known that the metre system proper to poetry in fixed form helped the rhapsodes and bards in memorising and recollecting such a long text as an epic. As bards drawn in Ingres' tableau wear white hair and very long white beards, the visibility of their ageing insured the authenticity of their story. Indeed, their memories were so amazing that they were able to keep some thousands of verses in mind. This volume may somehow be comparable to a computer's memory. But their mechanisms are very different. It is inconceivable that the Homeric rhapsode chanted every time the text of the *Iliad* in the authorised versions available now. His performance, including immediate recall, must have been carried out improvisationally. Even when he follows the text, his narration is brought out spontaneously from inside. Otherwise, his memory does not function—this is the reason why Plato's Ion was proud of enthusiasm in the literal sense of the word. We shall pay attention to what is implied in the fact that the fixed form of an epic supported the rhapsode's memory.

To simplify the case, let us suppose that the form of poetry is regulated by the number of syllables and that a verse counts ten syllables. When a rhapsode happens to be unable to recollect a word of three syllables at the end of

a verse, he can apply any word of three syllables that accords with the context. If the poem is rhyming, the range of choice must be narrower, but some possibilities may still be allowed. The rhapsode chooses *immediately* the word that he assumes the most suitable. Occasionally, orientated by this choice, in the next line, he might skip to a distant part of the same corpus. His narration goes with such a winding irregular movement. He can vivify his narration thanks to his present act of recollection. That is to say, the extraordinary memory of the rhapsode is not a mechanical repetition, but contains as an important factor a sort of creativity. If one asks for literal exactitude, such a character of memory is nothing but a defect. But when we reflect on a human being's memory and its ageing, this creativity is an essential element.

I am not writing here about creativity as value, but simply describing the fact that we supplement partial loss of memory by inventing something. In this part of creation (including deviation) is reflected the poet's or rhapsode's work in the present. His listener shares in this work, when he/she memorize and recollect a part of the epic. This allowance of makeshift can sometimes destroy the effect of literal memory, in such cases as constructing a house too near the seaside, disregarding the warning of the stone document about the possibility of suffering the disaster of a tsunami. That is a result of the weakened power of insistence of memory through ageing.

Memory fading represents the reality of human memory rather than one of its defects and in addition, overwriting it with an optimistic estimation and repeating errors constitute also a human's habit. Taking into consideration an advantage on hand, and describing the future on the basis of this short-run view, we commit serious mistakes. Animals following their instinct don't make any such mistake. (In 1995, a great earthquake struck the region of Kobe, and a few days before the disaster, it is said, dogs barked and cats cried in strange ways and small animals such as rats escaped). The fading of memories, which is supplemented by a creativity of intellect, is not limited to old human beings. It is also an important fact that memory not only restores the past but contributes to create future images and to orient decisions in the present. In this creativity of memory and recollection appears a way to the wisdom of living the ageing.

##### 5. Mutation of Time Structure

Oblivion begins even before ageing. Bergson considered that all experiences were kept latent in memory and took recollection as the focusing of memory search. Even young people in the growth period, however, have many past experiences that they can never recall. Indeed, the Bergsonian theory is a kind of absolute hypothesis which we cannot refute, for even when we cannot recall something now, we might be able to do so someday: a failure in experience does not entail the collapse of the principle. In addition, we occasionally recall to our surprise some cases of past events. However, we should still consider seriously the fact that there is an infinite number of experiences extrinsic to memory. Were we to keep everything in memory, its volume would be unbearable. In particular, we have many heartbreaking experiences in the past

we would never like to recollect. Fortunately, we are relieved by not having to recall them all the time. The lapse of memory is to be regarded, then not as an imperfection but an ability. If, however, I may call memory in the Bergsonian way, the whole of past experience including this latency, it will be possible to consider that we design our future and live our present on the basis of memory. Memory constitutes everyone's person.

Both youngsters and oldsters share this scheme. Of course, an old man or woman cannot be excused from a further reflection just by sharing this normal type of experience. The truth of ageing is that the structure of time changes and the shrinking of the world is its result. Deterioration of the body restricts activities, so much so that even walking becomes painful. Beauvoir writes: "Alain said that we desire only that which is possible: but this is too simple a rationalism. The old man's tragedy is that often he is no longer capable of what he desires." What she alluded to by "old man's tragedy" was "hunger, coldness and disease". In other words, she underlined old persons' inferior quality of life under any poor social security system. Free from the burden of work, old age is not rose-coloured. Reading in Alain's remark seemingly an implication that old people accept such a condition and their own shrunk future, Beauvoir made an insinuating remark. It goes without saying that her awareness of this social problem is important. But that does not concern the experience of ageing. On the contrary, in Alain's remark, we can read the structure of the time experience that is essential to ageing.

We consider the present or the actual phase of our life from the perspective of what to do in future (that is, possibility), and that is determined by the past (that is, what we have done, i.e. what we could have done, in our life). At some time, ageing brings about an awareness that the future is not open as we have long believed (Beauvoir's problem is that of tough old men before ageing): thus, the general structure of time is modified.

Now I cannot deny that my physical power is on the wane, and at the end of this process death is waiting. Such a recognition concerning the basis of existence obliges us to reflect on our own temporal condition ("Being-toward-death"). Far from being a philosophical speculation, however, such a reflection is a deliberation on how to live the present. Old age begins when one arrives at noticing that his or her future is not open any more but closed. Then this limited future flows back to the present and determines it. We can read Alain's words as grasping this situation.

At least I personally experienced such an awakening to my own old age. At one time, I accepted the fact that the rest of my time is limited. I strictly cut down my program of work, and gave up other subjects. To tell the truth, this essay on ageing was not on the program, so you may say that the strictness of my resolution was dubious. Before that time, it was not like that. I was willing to read new works and stimulated by them, and I constantly rewrote my work program to let the space of the future expand. In this way, I could cope with the determining force of the past. Now the experience of ageing triggers a reflux of time from the restricted future. As a result, the past (Alain's "that which is possible") comes into control.

We have to get along happily with our past. Consider especially the third mirror stage, where our own image from our younger days is dissociated from the consciousness of our present. Without overcoming this alienation, our selves are going to grow thinner. We have to regain the accurate image of our younger selves from memory.

## 6. Appropriation of Memory

It is not only the body that brings ageing to notice. The body is a personal fact. But we are not isolated in our life. Ageing is especially hard because we inevitably lose many friends. Beauvoir mentions Juvenal, who remarked this fact for the first time: “growing old means seeing the death of those we love; it means condemnation to mourning and sadness”. But “mourning and sadness” are only surface effects. Loss of a dear friend deforms our existence. I acknowledged that experience when I incurred such a loss. A poignant recognition came to me that my friend was a comrade in accomplishing something together and a witness who insured reality to my life. The word witness may sound like the word of a cool observer, but it is not the case: I just cannot find a better word.

And now to end this short essay I will describe these two aspects of my friend. A friend (とも=tomo in Japanese) is one with whom I do something together (*tomo-ni*, adv. means “together”). I see him from time to time and chat with a cup or glass. I send him a mail asking some question. Such a partner is a friend. I profit from his knowledge, but that is not the purpose. Occasionally I read a novel and am interested in its author. Then I remember that my friend once passionately discussed this novel with me. So, I call him to ask about the author. He might have lost his passion. That’s OK. That is the chat. Even more precious is his existence, the fact that he is there. Thinking he is in this world, I feel my heart warmer. Someone might object, saying that the situation does not change even if my friend has passed away. That is just “too simple a rationalism.” The fact that if I wish, I can see or converse with him through telephone or mail is absolutely different from the fact that even if I am keen to see him, it is impossible. Having dear friends constitutes and enriches my world. So, the loss of a friend shrinks and discolours my world.

I mean by ‘world’ the feeling of my existence that substantially coincides with the whole of my memory. But it pours out into the external world. Everyone knows that a place once he or she visited is dissimilar to unknown places: it has a certain sweetness. The town where a friend lives is exceptional. When I visit him at his place, the town becomes a kind of my own territory. Because he is living there, his town becomes more or less my town too. ‘My town’ I mean here in the sense of Thornton Wilder, and we can recall a number from the Musical play *My Fair Lady*, “On the Street Where You Live.” Everyone must know this feeling. When I was young, forming a good personal relationship with new friends, I had some towns of mine here and there. So, some spots on the world map were painted in my colour, and thus my world expanded and wore a deep colour. Death of a friend deletes a town of mine. It does not mean going back to the previous state. The town that was particularly dear thanks to



the friend of mine becomes a hard place because of his loss. How can we resist this shrinking of the world and regain its vivid colour?

Even after becoming old, it is not impossible for us to get a new friend. But as the power of action is not so strong, the real chances are not much, for a friend is someone with whom to do something. A special meaning is found in recollecting together with a friend the time shared with him or her. The past curved in my memory is nothing but what I am. To recall something from it is to put life into this entity, that is to get back myself. A friend is a precious witness. Chatting with him or her, I am given the feeling of reality about that past. Not only that, the fact of his or her living supports my recollection. Loss of such a friend weakens my past, which becomes as vague as a vain dream. They say there are people who never look back. They are amazing persons who ignore ageing.

Ageing probably is not an experience that we can undo. There are people (such as Kenreimon-in 建礼門院 (12-13 Century), depicted in the *Tale of the Heike*) who devoted their afterlife to praying to Buddha for the happiness of those who had been dear to them while in life. We can consider that such a devotion was not only a religious act. Even dear parents and friends having passed away, we can regain the vitality of our present minds by recalling the shared times with them in the past. Recollection in the manner of the rhapsode. After the recognition of ageing, we can hardly live without recalling vividly our own past, for that is the appropriation of ourselves. I use this word “appropriation” in the sense of Henri Lefevre. It literally means “to make one’s own,” and usually it is used in the sense “to make one’s own what belongs to another person.” Lefevre makes it a core technical term in his philosophy in the sense of “to make really one’s own what belongs to oneself”. With ageing, we absolutely have to restore the colour to our memory, for that is the appropriation of our own being.

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