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UN-LEARNING THE LONGING FOR THE PAST – REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY OLD AGE

Keywords: old age, ageing, nostalgia, longing for the past, fragility, learning, old-age challenges, new old age, biographical experience, reflexivity.

Abstract: This article is devoted to the reflections on the specific nature of old age derived from the author's inspirations with the categories found in the works by Zygmunt Bauman, Tadeusz Sławek and Krzysztof Maliszewski. Those are reflections on the phenomenon of ageing which is anchored in the post-modern culture. The author suggests that old age should be perceived not only as a social and demographic phenomenon occurring on the socio-cultural, economic, political or historical ground, but also as personal experience, an individual project, time in life experienced as a period without coercion but with the right to live one's own way, in one's own rhythm and on one's own.

Introduction

Much has already been written about old age. However, it was not enough to be able to uncover all its faces and anticipate how it can change, what faces it can assume in response to the changing, uncontrollable world. Old age and ageing have always been, in a sense, a reflection of a broad spectrum of social, cultural, political, economic and other changes. Old age has recently been entered by new generations of people with different historical experience, educational background, cultural capital, but also different expectations for oneself, the world and old age. This period of life assumes a new face with every generation entering it which results from the "input" of such a generation's experiences. According to Agnieszka Stopińska-Pająk, "old people are the social group characterised by the highest internal biographical differentiation among other age groups" (Stopińska-Pająk, 2018, p. 24). This author says that we have been confronted with different generations of old people at present who have different biographical experiences, but also different cultural patterns of old-age and ageing which is why they have displayed different attitudes to themselves and other people, to education or learning.

It is also necessary to ask about the strategies of preparation for old age. Do they change as well? Is any conscious effort made or strategy and direction of life followed as a way to prepare to get old? According to Zofia Szarota, “preparing for old age and its optimum experience has been present not only in gerontological theories. In a practical dimension, it is included in the activity of older people and seniors, in global and local social policy programmes, and in the offer of institutions offering services to older people” (Szarota, 2022, p. 287).

Obviously, this social group can be analysed and described using statistics, numbers, percentage, estimations and forecasts. However, I believe that it is also worth looking differently, more tenderly, at what cannot be grasped from any statistics, summaries, hard and measurable facts. In this article, I am going to attempt at such a tender approach to what can be called “stage directions” of old age. My reflections have been inspired by literary clues found in authors who opened up new spaces of my approach to old age and ageing without writing about old age. In my opinion, the words by Ryszard Koziółek, used as a title of the book, namely “literature is a good way of thinking”, are an apt description of what takes place while reading. When reading, we open up, although it is not always to what we read about. I am not certain whether this was what the author meant when he claimed that the “texts should work for us and for future generations” in his interview with Aleksander Hudzik published in *Przekrój*¹. I feel free to understand them this way as the literary clues which I found in the texts by Zygmunt Bauman, Tadeusz Sławek and Krzysztof Maliszewski “have worked”, inspiring me to find new spaces of reflections on old age.

Fragility

In the ponderations of K. Maliszewski devoted to the human condition, we can read as follows: “the severity of the human condition [...] consists in the inability to paralyse time and hence we fluctuate from the radical fear of the past and the hope for the future to the conservative nostalgia for the old times, lined with the anxiety caused by the approaching, inevitably worse, fate” (Maliszewski, 2021, p. 26). Between those words, you can feel the suggestions of the human condition fragility to which he devotes particular attention in his reflections². Old age seems to struggle with the problem of time more than any other stage of life. As the final stage, it touches the definitive end or the mortality. K. Maliszewski believes that life requires facing this challenge. Following J. Kristeva, he writes: “it is not about accepting mortality – is it not a paradigm of the impossible to accept? – but

¹ Interview with Professor Ryszard Koziółek of 2 June 23, <https://przekroj.pl/kultura/jesli-przeczytasz-poprawisz-sobie-zycie-aleksander-hudzik>; Accessed on: 11 July 2023.

² The fragility of life is most discussed by the author in the introduction which he called “Unhealthy Health and Amanda’s Effect”, pp. 9–23 in: K. Maliszewski, *Bez-silna edukacja. O kształceniu kruchego*. Katowice 2021.

about integrating its inevitable presence in the whole range of pleasures which we talk about. This is the price I need to pay to tame depression and fear caused by deficits, tragedies, loss of organs, atrophy of thoughts and the ability to speak, hallucinations and anxiety..., to get accustomed to them with some good spirits, with no pathos or enthusiasm” (Maliszewski, 2021, s. 35). Coming to terms with the inevitability of death is one of important and more difficult developmental tasks of old age. Of the old age which, comparing to the previous life stages, seems to have the right to be fragile, sensitive and weak, both due to the weakening body, tormented with involuntional processes, and to the burden of lifelong experiences, requiring a human to be able to cope with them. “There are such stages of old age, disability or disease, there are such tragedies, vileness and injustice affecting the most defenceless *homo sacer* (deprived of any defence), there are such maelstroms of sadness and folly that a human being would like not only, as Job’s friends, to sit in the dirt and say nothing, but simply to lie down and cease to exist. The human being may lose all stamina” (Maliszewski, 2021, p. 35).

According to E. Fromm, the difficulties, tragedies, injustice and suffering have the personality-forming power as “the internal control of oneself [...] is also shaping, shaping oneself, as the acquisition of the ability to suffer is a self-formation act” (Maliszewski, 2021, p. 33). Fragility is not weakness. It is sensitivity, but not the opposite of the human stamina. Old-age fragility needs not combating or being ashamed of. It has to be learned – un-learned to live with, to live with it and draw from it.

Obviously, a person can flee from pain, mask it, according to K. Maliszewski, wipe it away from their consciousness or even negate its existence or effects. “As Erich Fromm demonstrated, most people do not acknowledge that they are lonely, bored, anxious, that they do not have any hope (this is because the social pattern of success makes them suppress such emotions)” (Maliszewski, 2021, p. 33). Even if it is so, I believe that old age is a good time to acknowledge the said feelings. When confronted with the unavoidable, a human being stands a chance to become authentic and honest with themselves. The tool here is the balance (overview) of life which S. Steuden perceives as “an instrument helpful to adapt to the old age for people who struggled with many difficulties [...] Paradoxically, however, the personality development of seniors seems to be more an effect of difficult life experiences than successes” (S. Steuden, 2012, p. 109). Balancing one’s own life either by means of self-verification or self-valorisation requires self-reflection, composure and turning to oneself, and is a developmental need in the old age resulting from the achievement of the biographical perspective, i.e. the attitude assessing one’s own life (Majewska-Kafarowska, 2017, p. 47).

Old age is conditional on previous life stages. A specific category, referred to by K. Maliszewski as well, is the responsibility, an immanent feature of adulthood, its attribute and the developmental task at the same time, as “taking responsibility for one’s own awareness is a key time of adulthood (leaving mental childhood),

although I do not believe that it can be done once and forever” (Maliszewski, 2021, p. 75). Does old age demand responsibility for its awareness? Yes, it definitely does. Old age is the final stage of life, preceded with the effort of becoming, development, education and learning. The author believes that the basic task of education is to “help a human being to take responsibility for their life, to empower them enough so as not to be a puppet of their environment” (Maliszewski, 2021, p. 75). For this reason, it seems that this responsibility can be expected or that old age should also have such an attribute. In this context, it is worth looking at old age from the perspective of the potential biographical experience which is conducive to more reflexive evaluation of life. If this inclination to be reflexive referring to the accumulated life experience comes together with an active attitude to one’s own life, “the collected life experiences predispose the person to be wise or to possess wisdom” (Majewska-Kafarowska, 2017, p. 46). This may be wisdom referring to one’s own life or to life as such. The former is sometimes referred to as personal wisdom and, according to S. Steuden, is connected with mature personality, mental well-being, cognitive functioning and age. The wisdom referring to the life as such, or general wisdom, is an expression of mature personality, expressed in openness to new experiences, but also “offers the opportunity for introspection and reflection, hence facilitating the acquisition and strengthening of the personal wisdom. A prerequisite for the acquisition of personal wisdom by seniors is the basic everyday skills and the basic level of subjective well-being. Cognitive skills are correlated with general wisdom and, similarly, positive and negative life events must be faced by the person which gives them skills and allows to reach higher development level of their own self and higher adaptation degree” (Steuden, 2012, p. 123). An important ability, or even an indispensable tool to build wisdom, is learning, including but not limited to learning from experience. According to E. Dubas, learning from experience is a lifelong learning, incidentally, randomly, or in a planned and purposeful way. It may stem from performing life tasks or ordinary everyday activities. This experiential learning is a direct one, “in a co-presence, co-participation and co-operation, during events, life circumstances, by contacts and interactions at the same time and in the same space, by meetings, discussions, dialogue, observations, actions etc. It is learning in relationships where experiences are created” (Dubas, 2011, p. 7). Knowledge and skills are developed thanks to experiences, even the borrowed ones. This is why it is so important to spend one’s old age among people as this creates opportunities to borrow experiences. “Being among others offers opportunities to perceive their experiences, observe different experiences or the ones similar to one’s own. Other people’s experiences may become a point of reference to understand or interpret one’s own experiences” (Majewska-Kafarowska, 2017, pp. 48–49).

Nostalgia

Seniors have a justified tendency to look backwards, and sometimes to glorify the past, with simultaneous devaluation of the present, or at times even to be afraid of the future. According to S. Steuden, the retrospective temporal orientation observed in seniors is conditional on the mental and physiological background. Focusing on the past does not consist solely in recollecting the times of youth, the time long gone, but also offers the opportunity to reinterpret and re-assess one's own experiences being the content of memories (Steuden, 2011, p. 190).

The nostalgia for the old days, for the time when they entered new social roles boldly and hopefully, with a sense of power and agency stemming not only from the physical condition of young age, but also from the mental stamina, hope arising from their living plans developed in a well-known and understandable world, foreseeable future, seems to be comprehensible and normal. It is even more comprehensible as, in the final stage of adulthood, the world becomes difficult, not understandable, unfriendly and alien. Such feelings result from changes taking place at an unprecedented pace, anchored in the globalisation processes which have changed our world for two or three decades in a way perceptible not only at the level of generations, as it used to be, but also at the level of individual experience and biography. Most probably, old age had always been accompanied by nostalgia for young age, but I am certain that the modern times have largely intensified that nostalgia, particularly in seniors are not so good at keeping up with changes slower, are not so well versed in what the world offers to us and, consequently, sidetrack themselves or are sidetracked (like Bauman's human waste³) in an act of (self-)exclusion. Living the past may be an expression of the inability to accept the process of passing and ageing and is most probably conditional on the fear of getting old (Steuden, 2012, p. 191). Excessive focus on the past reduces the flexibility of behaviour and, consequently, may make adaptation difficult. According to Zaleski, such an excessive focus on the past "results in losing energy and may lead to pathology so in order for the past to play its important role, a part of self must refer to the present and the future" (Zaleski, 1988, p. 934).

Reflecting on nostalgia, Zygmunt Bauman quotes Svetlana Boym who believes that "this is a sense of losing space and a sense of relocation, but also a romantic relationship with one's own imagination" (Bauman, 2018, p. 10). Z. Bauman reminds that according to S. Boym, although nostalgia was considered to be easily curable in 17th century, "by 21st century, this transient complaint developed to become an incurable modernity-related condition. The 20th century started with utopia, and finished with nostalgia" (Bauman, 2018, p. 10). Interestingly, S. Boym claims that nostalgia can be perceived as "a defence mechanism in the era of increased pace of life and historical tremors" (Bauman,

³ The category of human waste was discussed in a book by Z. Bauman, *Życie na przemiał*, Kraków 2004, p. 66 and other.

2018, p. 10). Here, I need to state clearly that my understanding of nostalgia entails the longing for the past, for young age, for what is long gone. However, both S. Boym and Z Bauman reflect on nostalgia for one's motherland and perceive nostalgia as a defence mechanism which may be dangerous as it makes "the imaginary motherland mistaken for the real one" (Bauman, 2018, p. 10).

Nostalgia is the longing for specific events or people of the past, or for the family home (Gilewska, 2022). Nostalgia is a double-power affect, both destructive and motivating. Feelings, such as longing, nostalgia, are not to be discussed with. They either exist or do not exist. They either destroy a person because we surrender to them, or they sparkle inside them, tormenting them and calling for action. For those who do not want it to become the essence of their life, it becomes a driving force to do something with it, so as not to change it into mere "waiting" with a painful non-acceptance of the fact that the former life is no longer approachable. Besides sensory factors (smell, taste, sound, image and touch), nostalgia can be triggered by loneliness, sense of meaninglessness, negative mood, but also existential threats or the awareness of death (Gilewska, 2022).

A thing important to understand the mechanism of nostalgia is the discussion of the temporal orientation ingrained in human life periods, but also of the temporal dimensions. According to Piotr K. Oleś, the temporal orientation of a human "has been influenced by their knowledge of oneself and of the world. The knowledge of the world is not restricted to the number of years as it means the awareness of one's own health, physical stamina, appearance, social role and, more importantly, adaptation of those components to the expected pattern based on one's own aspirations and the awareness of the social standards" (Oleś, 2011, p. 61). According to P. K. Oleś, the awareness of the passing time may cause anxiety, as "the time calculated from the present time to the end of life anticipated one day gives rise to anxiety, first and foremost" (Oleś, 2011, p. 62). This anxiety is particularly strong in middle age which stems from the shrinking present. According to the said author, this results from realising the necessity or rather the inevitability of death, but also from the belief that one would not be able to fulfil all the planned life objectives and dreams, and that some opportunities and chances have long been lost (Oleś, 2011, p. 62). The anxiety experienced at that stage of life may be a motivating factor, an incentive to change, which creates chances for alterations, the effects of which will be felt at the final stage of life.

In early adulthood, people are primarily oriented towards the future. In the middle years, they are "suspended" between the past and the future. Older adults focus on the past more, they reflect, recapitulate and make settlements with the past. Obviously, the strategies are not unchallengeable. Certainly, many older adults do not focus on the past but are well oriented towards the present. They may do it on purpose, avoiding reflecting on their own past and its meanings. According to P. K. Oleś, "because of referring to the ultimate values which offer seniors the perspective to reflect on their life, their orientation towards the past is not less

important than a prospective attitude, and the development of the philosophy of life allows to cross the boundaries of time enclosing human life, to obliterate the boundaries between the past, present and the future, and to look for universal points of reference as if outside of time” (Oleś, 2011, p. 64). Paradoxically, nostalgia, the longing for the past, may help to obliterate those boundaries of time or look for points of reference. Nostalgia, in particular the old-age one, has also an existential significance as it refers to all important living experiences with the close ones who are no longer there. According to A. Gilewska, nostalgia is a mental resource offering much benefits for human well-being and mental health. Longing for someone who is no longer there may strengthen the sense of connection, but also the sense of the meaningful life in the lonely persons. Interestingly, this also means a chance to improve the mental condition by counteracting the sense of the meaninglessness of life, bringing back or mental returning to the happy times and deceased people (A. Gilewska, 2022). According to S. Steuden, the seniors’ tendency to refer to the past, in particular in difficulties, to their own abilities and competences they used to have, may serve to strengthen their sense of self-esteem (Steuden, 2012, p. 191). Hence, the past or, more specifically, what we can take from it, may be an invaluable tool in the process of constructive coping with three temporal perspectives, including but not limited to with the unavoidable passing of time.

Un-learning

Tadeusz Sławek writes that “un-learning is forging a shield” which is defined by the author, in reference to K. Bielawski, as the one “which needs to be held in front of you persistently to defend yourself from anything which threatens your life and its most important aspects” (Sławek, 2021, p. 55). K. Bielawski believes that such a shield can be found in paideia, referring to the Delphi sententia devoted to paideia analysed by him. According to C. Wodziński, paideia means “rearing (of children), exercising and teaching, spiritual (mental) culture, education, knowledge and cultivation” (Sławek, 2021, p. 55). T. Sławek claims that paideia understood in this way “means the ability to look at the world differently than we are used to look [...], the ability to make the human world more “human” than it used to be before” (Sławek, 2021, p. 56).

As I have already mentioned, the old age entails the risk of longing for the past at the expense of ignoring the present and the future. Some seniors tend to stop, to suspend their own life (entering a “stand-by”, as this is called by young people). They believe that “the true life has ended, not the old age has come”⁴. Hence, it is a challenge to develop the attitude which, respecting the past, what happened and what the person was, appreciates the present life and allows to make plans for the future. This vision of old age requires commitment of its subject, their activity

⁴ The excerpt from the interview with 83-year-old Kazimiera in May 2023 performed by the participants of my diploma seminar.

and responsibility for their own life. It requires openness to changes. Openness to changing oneself as a response to the changing world. According to T. Sławek, “learning is going out, the beginning of un-learning” (Sławek, 2021, p. 173). Going out which I understand as active participation, involvement, being among others, not just because you are supposed to do it, but because you want, because this results from your need, is an old-age measure to un-learn nostalgia, longing for the past, although solely the one which incapacitates and makes the person ignore the present and overlook any possible future. Un-learning, i.e. the disagreement for living the past, and living the life involved in the present with respect for the past. As T. Sławek writes, “to un-learn means to challenge both the certainty of unshakeable image of the past (the one solidified once and forever) and the arrogance of pursuing the new (the desire for what has not been before)” (Sławek, 2021, p. 142). This perspective seems perfectly aligned with what may happen in the old age. It is not worth glorifying the past. It is better to have reasonable respect for it which will make you open-minded, but also protect you from the “pursuit” of the new. Nostalgia for the past requires un-learning in order to save/retain/obtain the value of the present and the future. This seems a highly important task of the old age, in particular if we stress the fact that the past is certain, it is the seniors’ experiences, a certain foundation of self-confidence. T. Sławek follows that “un-learning results in the saving reduction of self-confidence” (Sławek, 2021, p. 142) which, I believe, creates opportunities to encourage the human to act, to participate in their own life actively, to commit to their own old age. Hence, un-learning is the act of opening up to one’s old-age life in its new form.

Coda

Agnieszka Stopińska-Pająk claims that “we can risk the thesis that the human ageing culture is a culture delayed when compared to the post-modern one, the era of liquid modernity or post-modernity, and has remained in 20th century. We could even say that it is retarded even more (Stopińska-Pająk, 2018, p. 23). The models passed so far have become outdated meaning that an urgent need arises to shape the old-age cultural patterns adequate to the 21st-century challenges. According to the author, the paradigm shift which took place in social sciences and humanities allows to perceive the old age not only as a social phenomenon, as demographic processes on the socio-cultural, economic, political or historical ground, but also as inimitable, exceptional and unique personal experience. Finally, the old age is perceived as an individual project “which, in turn, makes a human being, a senior, to face challenges of constant learning, having/acquiring auto-creation and interpretation competences. Hence, it needs redefining the old age, offering a new vision of a senior, adequate to the challenges brought about by 21st century. In the post-modern, information, liquid and volatile society, the roles and place of seniors need to be redefined (Stopińska-Pająk, 2018, p. 22–23).

I believe that the old-age understanding, but also redefining, may benefit from the concept of the quantitative and qualitative time proposed by Krzysztof Pomian⁵. The quantitative time is “obviously, the clock time which, because of its uniformity, does not know any day or night, seasons of the year and Sundays” (Pomian, 2014, p. 310). The qualitative time is the one when the human being liberates themselves from the quantitative time pressure. The said author claims that “in our societies, every or close to every individual experiences the historical conflict between the quantitative and the qualitative time anew” (Pomian, 2014, p. 309). The resistance towards the quantitative time can be seen “whenever individuals are forced to align their temporal organization of physiological functions and sensorimotor activities with it, to subject their spontaneous, personalised and changing rhythms to uniform machine speeds identical for everyone and any time” (Pomian, 2014, p. 311). As suggested by K. Pomian, this conflict can be changed by “the alternation, during the year, of the quantitative, programmed, mostly municipal and industrial time, predominated with work, with the qualitative time, left to itself, connected with wildlife or anything which replaces it, and liberated from utilitarian concerns” (Pomian, 2014, p. 311). This about striving to reach the balance.

Perhaps, in line with this concept, we could or even we should, as it may be worth it, look at old age as primarily qualitative time, a natural effect of the previous stages of life where the quantitative time was predominant: the time of responsibilities, duties and discipline, of allocating time to various obligations. I believe that the quantitative time encapsulates memories, the history of human life, which are not only the essence of the past, but also the building blocks of the present and the future. Hence, the quantitative time should be perceived as an important component, the context of or even a requirement for the qualitative time. The seniors’ attitude to the past (measured or determined by the quantitative time) should be conducive to the balance of those two temporal dimensions. Following the periods of life under the terror of time, the pressure of time, the necessity to keep it, to respect any procedures made in time, not always consistent with the human biological clock (shift work, work with no daylight, work underground or under water etc.), it seems highly justifiable to offer the old age, the time after the career ended and the major tasks of early and middle adulthood were completed, the right to be qualitative, to be liberated, to be the time when the individual can (be strong, learn etc.) but does not need to do it. Edyta Geppert sings that she is “not afraid of the world” because she “no longer has to do anything”⁶. From this perspective, the old age stands a chance of being experienced as the time with no coercion, but with the right to live one’s own way, in one’s own rhythm, on one’s

⁵ In his book, K. Pomian offers interesting characteristics of time. He divides it into the qualitative and quantitative, into the solar one, but also the liturgical, private, personal, professional etc. K. Pomian, *Porządek czasu*, Gdańsk 2014.

⁶ E. Geppert, “Bo już nic nie muszę”, a song from the album called *Nic nie muszę – 25 lecie* published in 2008 see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjsyzVGkHIM> (accessed on 31.08.23).

own, although by the very absence of this coercion, terror of the qualitative time, it also leaves room for staying up-to-date, to participate in social life, in education, to learn, unless this results from any coercion.

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