The Other within Me: The Existential Ambiguity of Old Age in *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* by Elizabeth Taylor and *Elizabeth Is Missing* by Emma Healey

Anna Orzechowska
Academy of Finance and Business Vistula

Abstract: This article seeks to analyse *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (1971) by Elizabeth Taylor and the award-winning *Elizabeth Is Missing* (2014) by Emma Healey with reference to the existential-phenomenological accounts of old age and aging elaborated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Coming of Age* and Jean Améry in *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation*. It is argued that both novels bring to prominence what may be described in Beauvoir's terms as the lived experience of existential ambiguity, which haunts the elderly female protagonists as their inner sense of self comes increasingly into conflict with both their physical changes and the identity thrust upon them by others. Taylor's Mrs Palfrey, along with the other elderly residents of the Claremont Hotel in London, and Healey's dementia-ridden Maud are caught in a struggle to resist the social stigma of old age, which puts constraints on their freedom of self-determination, while simultaneously growing estranged from themselves and external reality. In examining this ambiguity, the article accords particular attention to its manifestations in the characters' interpersonal relationships, altered way of being-in-the-world and experience of the body.

Keywords: Old age, existential, ambiguity, Taylor, Healey, Beauvoir, Améry

Introduction

"Society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that it is unseemly to mention," opines Simone de Beauvoir (1972, 1) in *The Coming of Age* (1970) with a view to examining this neglected subject from both a socio-historical and an existential-phenomenological perspective. A similar impulse for demystifying "the lived experience of being old" (Miller 2001, 129) appears to drive two novels that will be studied in this article: *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (1971)

by Elizabeth Taylor and *Elizabeth Is Missing* by Emma Healey (2014). The former, instantiating "the emergence in the early 1970s of a body of new fiction which self-consciously interrogated the processes of aging" (Wallace 2011, 393), portrays the aged community of the Claremont Hotel in London, focusing on a friendly bond between the eponymous heroine and Ludovic Myers, a young aspiring writer whom she encounters accidently after slipping on the street. The latter, which plays with the conventions of detective fiction, traces the efforts of Maud, its dementia-ridden eighty-two-year-old narrator, to discover what has become of her elderly friend Elizabeth.

Published in two different centuries, more than forty years apart, and differing markedly in terms of plot, the two novels have been selected due to their central concern with the existential dimension of old age as a situation that is unassimilable into the elderly person's own self-definition and self-perception. Each of them foregrounds the "identification crisis" (Beauvoir 1972, 291) with which the protagonist struggles as her sense of self falters under the impact of ever more prominent physical changes and the restrictive identity thrust upon the aged by their environments. They both show that, despite the passage of time, old age remains imagined in terms of disruption in existential self-understanding, crucially shaped by social circumstances. In what follows, it will be argued that this disruption can be elucidated with reference to the concept of existential ambiguity defined by Beauvoir in her *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) in terms of tension between being "a sovereign and unique subject" and "an object for others" (Beauvoir 1968, 7). This understanding of ambiguity guides much of *The Coming of Age,* which has recently received renewed interest from scholars, as evidenced by the publications by Chris Gilleard (2022), Silvia Stoller (2014) or Kathleen Woodward (2018), who recognise its importance for old age studies even when disagreeing with some of Beauvoir's claims. This work will provide the theoretical underpinning for this article, supplemented by *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation* by Jean Améry (1968), who "[echoed], or rather [anticipated], many of the themes developed by de Beauvoir" (Gilleard 2022, 286). The following section will explore both these accounts to lay the groundwork for the analysis of the novels, which will demonstrate that Mrs Palfrey and Maud, as well as other elderly characters, are caught in conflict between their own self-definition and their social position. In examining this ambiguity of being both subject and object, the article will accord particular attention to its manifestations in the characters' interpersonal relationships, altered way of being-in-the-world and experience of the body.

Old Age in the Accounts of Simone De Beauvoir and Jean Améry

Beauvoir and Améry alike understand old age as a social construct. The latter philosopher problematises it in terms of "social age," arguing that one is labelled as elderly always through "the look of the others" (Améry 1994, 55). The former similarly posits that it is one's social environment that makes one aware of being old (Beauvoir 1972, 288), adding that this awareness is typically approached with incredulity since old age is always imagined as a condition that "only affects other people" (Beauvoir 1972, 5). The moment of confronting oneself as old thus marks a profound identity crisis. First, old age involves social degradation to the position of an "outcast" (Beauvoir 1972, 2) stripped of any influence on the outside world. Second, it triggers self-alienation as the elderly person is torn "between inner and outer perceptions" (Martin 2011, 131), often feeling hardly any internal change while being recognised by others as old (Beauvoir 1972, 284, 292). It is this incongruity that throws them into confusion about their own identity: "his inner being [that of the elderly person] does not accept the label that has been stuck to him – he no longer knows who he is" (Beauvoir 1972, 292). Améry similarly sees "a conflict within us between the image that we have of ourselves and the image that others have of us" as inherent in the process of aging (Sternad 2021, 317). When depicting an elderly woman gazing at herself in the mirror, he describes how her reflection presents a stark contrast to her own self-concept, making her a "stranger to herself" (Améry 1994, 31). "In aging," Améry concludes, "we become alienated from ourselves, doubled and inscrutable" (Améry 1994, 50).

The alienating discrepancy between the two perspectives instils ambiguity in the process of aging. For Améry, at the same time as growing painfully self-estranged, the elderly person develops "an increased sense of self" (Améry 1994, 32). For Beauvoir, in turn, old age casts a stark light upon the inherently ambiguous nature of the human condition: that of being a subject for oneself and an object for others (Heinämaa 2014, 172; Miller 2001, 138). The philosopher memorably asserts that "[w]ithin me it is the Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself" (Beauvoir 1972, 420), thus encapsulating the predicament of aging, which drives a "split" between the personal vantage point of the aged person and the objectifying look of others (Miller 2001, 138, 146). Most significantly, Beauvoir precludes a possibility of full identification with the latter perspective (Beauvoir 1972, 290, 291, 294). Granted, sooner or later, the objective

situation revealed from outside is accepted, but the sense of dissonance persists; the elderly person thus oscillates between the two positions, "never managing to hold them both firmly together" (Beauvoir 1972, 290).

Furthermore, Beauvoir and Améry characterise old age also in terms of "a radically transformed state of being" (Sandford 2006, 102) or, to use the Heideggerian term, an altered manner of being-in-the-world. They call attention to how the elderly grasp the external world as a perilous habitat frustrating their slightest efforts so that their daily life becomes constant struggle and toil. The aging person, notes Beauvoir, "is endangered in the outside world" (Beauvoir 1972, 464), encountering obstacles all around that pose a threat to their security and comfort (Beauvoir 1972, 304). Both she and Améry conceptualise the aging subject/world relationship in terms of antagonism, the former when writing about "inimicality in things" (Beauvoir 1972, 304) and the latter when stating that "the world … becomes their adversary" (Améry 1994, 37). The predominant state of mind in aging is thus "insecurity" in the face of one's own incapacity to keep the surrounding environment under control (Beauvoir 1972, 464).

The sense of not-being-at-home in the world can be largely attributed to the deterioration of the body, which ceases to be "our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects" (Beauvoir 2011, 46). No longer a vehicle of agency, it hampers one's plans (Beauvoir 1972, 315), transforming from "an instrument" into "a hindrance" (Beauvoir 1972, 317). While "all human existence is transcendence and immanence at the same time" (Beauvoir 2011, 443), thus a mixture of capacity for perpetual self-making and materiality amenable to external influences, the body in old age brings the latter dimension to the fore. Clearly anticipating Beauvoir's perspective, Améry also foregrounds this problematic role of the aging body, which manifests itself with an unprecedented force while being mostly unmanageable (Améry 1994, 40). As it "becomes more and more mass and less and less energy" (Améry 1994, 92), it loses much of its power to serve human purposes, setting ever new limits and making ever more demands (Améry 1994, 35). As aptly phrased by Christopher Hamilton, in Améry's account, it acts as "something that *one does not have* but which *has one*" (Hamilton 2016, 307; emphasis in original).

It is yet not only in physical terms that one grows detached from the world but also in cognitive and intellectual ones (Améry 1994, 90, 92). In this context, Améry refers to the process of "cultural aging" (Améry 1994, 110, 111, 119), involving an inhibited ability to comprehend the surrounding reality with its

altered values, attitudes, and ways of being (Améry 1994, 84, 78, 102). The elderly not only lack the flexibility to respond to cultural novelties with alacrity (Améry 1994, 92) but are also likely to develop hostility towards the prevalent *Zeitgeist*, (Améry 1994, 78). This view is shared by Beauvoir, who notes that the aged, bereft of "the time and the means for adapting themselves to new circumstances," tend to cling to bygone practices and beliefs (Beauvoir 1972, 418). In physical decline and behind the times, they are usually trapped in existential "inertia" (Beauvoir 1972, 271) and "boredom" (Beauvoir 1972, 459), with the awareness of having nothing significant to offer to the world becoming ever more acute (Beauvoir 1972, 464). The elderly, Améry observes, bear the stigma of "creatures without potential," defined solely by their past and with no prospects for future success (Améry 1994, 55).

To summarise, Beauvoir and Améry theorise old age in terms of an identity crisis embedded in a social context. The objective reality of aging as perceived by others usually conflicts with one's inner perception, thus engendering self-estrangement and a sense of existential ambiguity. At the same time, old age involves a shift in the experience of the world, which reveals itself as a threatening space that the elderly person can no longer shape through their creative activity. These observations will be drawn upon in the following sections to examine how *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* and *Elizabeth Is Missing* depict, each in its own way, the socially and existentially precarious position of their aged characters.

Old Age in *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*

"Every metamorphosis has something frightening about it," Beauvoir asserts (1972, 5), and, indeed, the opening of *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* evokes a sense of disquietude as the eponymous heroine is on the cusp on what may be read as her symbolic passage into old age proper: "alarmed at the threat of her own depression," the narrator recounts, Mrs Palfrey "tried to banish terror from her heart" (Taylor 2011, 1). Her way to the Claremont Hotel, due to become her abode for widowhood, is only a prelude to the impression of entrapment that strikes her the moment she enters her room: "she thought that prisoners must feel as she did now, the first time they are left in their cell" (Taylor 2011, 2). Soon it becomes apparent that just as prisoners, so too the elderly residents of the Claremont are consigned to social margins (Tyler 1993, 177). The inferior status of the hotel itself as a site far away from people's interests is signalled by the

very fact that Mrs Palfrey's driver has never heard of it (Taylor 2011, 1). Towards the end of the novel, it is articulated in explicit terms by the hotel manager, who blames his clients for diminishing the prestige of the place: "He was getting a little tired of these old people, … cluttering up the place and boring everybody" (Taylor 2011, 181). For Mr Wilkins, old age is "hateful" and thus intended to be "driven out" (Beauvoir 1972, 43), an approach he shares with the relatives of Taylor's aged characters, who visit the latter only out of duty (Taylor 2011, 19) or, as do Mrs Palfrey's daughter and grandson for much of the plot, show hardly any interest in their life.

Paul Bailey states that the Claremont residents fail to "[acknowledge] that they have been cast aside" (Bailey 2011), but it appears that the awareness of "losing [their] place in society, [their] dignity and almost [their] reality" (Beauvoir 1972, 266) is not entirely foreign to them. Mrs Post painfully remembers the hours of "sitting there waiting for someone to turn up" (Taylor 2011, 122). Mrs Arbuthnot is clearly apprehensive of "being a nuisance to other people" (Taylor 2011, 43). Mr Osmond knows only too well that the woman is bound to be treated with heartless indifference after moving to a nursing home: "They will let her die there: as she deteriorates, they will not be bothered to get her out of bed" (Taylor 2011, 99). It is also he who intimates that society robs the elderly of their personal identity as individual subjects: "When one's old, … no one calls you by your Christian name" (Taylor 2011, 142). It should be noted here that "[a] greatly diminished sense of self-identity" is what plagues all the elderly residents (Tyler 1993, 158), including Mrs Palfrey herself:

> When she was young, she had had an image of herself to present to her new husband, whom she admired; then to herself, thirdly to the natives (I am an Englishwoman). Now, no one reflected the image of herself, and it seemed diminished: it had lost two thirds of its erstwhile value (no husband, no natives). (Taylor 2011, 3)

Having been stripped of her social roles, the heroine has "no longer anything by which [s]he can identify himself" (Beauvoir 1972, 493). She is lingering in a void, without any point of reference to validate her own sense of self.

Much as the Claremont residents are mindful of their own declining status, they refuse to embrace old age as part of their self-conception. Their resistance to identification as old can be discerned in how they "deny solidarity" (Améry

1994, 69) to each other. Taylor's elderly characters "[compete] for prestige" (Tyler 1993, 156), organising their microcosm according to a hierarchy where the younger and fitter one is, the more esteem one enjoys, as does Mrs de Salis, who "might have felt set apart from the others by her youthfulness (she was only sixty)" (Taylor 2011, 104). Furthermore, they avoid their mutual company, as if for fear of becoming imbricated in the reality of aging: "At the Claremont, days were lived separately. One sat at separate tables and went on separate walks" (Taylor 2011, 22). Mrs Palfrey herself bemoans being "helplessly exposed – to the idiosyncrasies of other old people" (Taylor 2011, 177), apparently succumbing to the "[temptation] to say 'I belong to a different category'" (Beauvoir 1972, 294). She does so even more fervently in her relationship with Ludo. On the one hand, this relationship rescues her out of the desolation to which she is exposed due to neglect from her own family. On the other, it may be interpreted as an instance of the tendency to "cling to [young people] in an absurd longing" that Améry attributes to the elderly (1994, 69). Her urge to "be completely in his hands" (Taylor 2011, 25) expresses her longing to remain part of the world of the young. Ludo embodies "a new ingredient in her life" (Taylor 2011, 34) that assuages the tedium and humiliation of aging. Not only does she climb up the social ladder of the Claremont (Taylor 2011, 37), but she also finds renewed enthusiasm in her life. By forming a strong attachment to the man, she "feel[s] … less bound to the rules of old age" (Tyler 1993, 176).

Taylor's aged characters thus veer between the recognition of their own vulnerable position in the social structure and dissociation from the stigma of old age. This fundamental ambiguity of being both an object upon whom others confer meaning and a self-constituting subject comes into focus also in Ludo's perception of Mrs Palfrey. For all his courtesy and supportiveness, the man views the heroine with a distinct note of condescension. Beauvoir contends that "[e]ven if they [the elderly] are treated properly they are still looked upon as objects, not as subjects" (Beauvoir 1972, 479), and Ludo appears to be a good case in point. In a letter to his girlfriend, the man admits that his acquaintance with Mrs Palfrey offers him an opportunity to gather material for his novel about old age, thus demonstrating his instrumental treatment of the heroine: "fortune cast an old lady down my area, just when I needed her" (Taylor 2011, 45). Throughout the plot, he is repeatedly shown gazing at Mrs Palfrey, seeking to glean an insight into the reality of old age, which simultaneously inspires his interest and defies his understanding: "he registered the strange, tired petal-softness

of her skin, stored *that* away for future usefulness. And the old smell, which was too complex to describe yet" (Taylor 2011, 34; emphasis in original). For Ludo, the woman represents "a rather fine examples of the species" (Taylor 2011, 45), thus a mere object to be dissected, as illustrated by his notebook: "veins on leg colour of grapes … smell of lavender water (ugh!) … big spots on back of shiny hands and more veins – horizontal wrinkles across hands" (Taylor 2011, 28). He reduces her to the immanence of her aging body, erasing her unique subjectivity to subsume it under the collective category of the aged.

The subject/object tension also underlies the contrast between the social marginalisation of the aged characters and their adamant resistance to take it for granted. "[T]he ability to save face" acquires primary importance at the Claremont (Tyler 1993, 168), as witnessed most obviously by Mrs Palfrey's lying to the other residents about the reasons why her grandson does not visit her and persuading Ludo to pose as Desmond (Taylor 2011, 18). This keeping up appearances is not so much hypocrisy as "the refusal to … become the insect, the inert object to which the adult world wishes to reduce the aged" (Beauvoir 1972, 486). Mrs Palfrey is acting out of desire to "maintain a dignified autonomous personal identity" (Tyler 1993, 142) rather than slipping into the objectifying definition thrust upon her from the outside. She consistently "[makes] a stand to establish her personality" (Taylor 2011, 17), displaying her own capacity of self-constitution. It is not only social objectification that she strives to oppose but also the deterioration of her own body and mind. Apart from learning poems by heart and taking walks to keep good health (Taylor 2011, 100), Mrs Palfrey follows a set of self-imposed rules of conduct: "Be independent; never give way to melancholy; never touch capital" (Taylor 2011, 9). By doing so, she makes a point of confirming her own status as a self-determining agent with a firm "grasp upon [herself]" (Beauvoir 1972, 315).

Nevertheless, regardless of how determined Mrs Palfrey and the other Claremont residents are to retain an unwavering sense of subjectivity, old age takes its toll on their experience of being-in-the-world. Beauvoir observes that "it is enough for them [the elderly] to know that they are defenceless to be filled with anxiety" (Beauvoir 1972, 464); indeed, even with the strict face-saving rules, Mrs Palfrey can hardly prevent herself from "[feeling] flurried and anxious" (Taylor 2011, 31). For the heroine, "living can no longer be taken for granted" (Beauvoir 1972, 304), requiring, as it does, constant self-surveillance and struggle: "She realised that she never walked now without knowing what she was

doing and concentrating upon it" (Taylor 2011, 69). Aging disrupts her usual absorption in the world, which presents itself a site that she is unable to navigate freely in pursuit of her own projects: "The disaster of being old was in not feeling safe to venture anywhere, of seeing freedom put out of reach" (Taylor 2011, 69). It thus brings the agony of sliding towards an impoverished existence — of becoming "an expression of a negation" (Améry 1994, 68): "It was hard work being old. … every day for the old means some little thing lost" (Taylor 2011, 172).

The sense of paralysis and infirmity unveils itself to the characters most poignantly through their corporeality. When Taylor describes how Mrs Palfrey "[falls] with the sickening crash of a heavy, elderly person" (Taylor 2011, 24), she turns the spotlight on the heroine's body "as progressive decrease in energy and increase in substance" (Améry 1994, 40), a mass incapable of serving as her anchor in the world. It is yet the experience of Mrs Arbuthnot that brings the problem to the most striking expression. The novel spares no details in recounting how her aging body "heaps its burdens upon [her]" (Améry 1994, 42): "Her rigid limbs were torture to her, and every attempt at finding a more comfortable way of lying hurt" (Taylor 2011, 41). When she becomes incontinent, it also exposes her to the humiliation of being a plaything of forces beyond her control as she "wake[s] up and find[s] the bed saturated, and herself stiff and helpless" (Taylor 2011). More than that, it literally "cuts [her] off from world" (Améry 1994, 35), forcing her to leave the hotel to wait for death in a nursing-home.

Socially marginalised and physically weak, Taylor's aged characters fall prey also to overwhelming ennui, as does Mrs Burton, who "tapped her bright finger-nails against her teeth, from boredom" (Taylor 2011, 49), whiling their time away on monotonously repetitive activities without any specific goal. Tormented by the vacuity of "just sitting and resting" (Taylor 2011, 24), Mrs Palfrey craves for meaningful projects, envying Mr Osmond his commitment to writing letters of complaint to the *Daily Telegraph*: "He is taking action, he is expressing himself" (Taylor 2011, 62). To stifle "that terrible curse, boredom" (Beauvoir 1972, 541), the heroine contents herself even with such trivial missions as going to the library to borrow a book for Mrs Arbuthnot, relying on them for a sense of purpose in life (Taylor 2011, 23). Most of the time, however, she remains ensnared in the position of a passive spectator rather than an active participant in the surrounding reality; while she is musing about the upcoming spring, "the young [hasten] past her with Saturday night ahead of them, and all that that

entailed" (Taylor 2011, 70), their worlds clearly set apart.

4. Old Age in *Elizabeth is Missing*

Katsura Sako observes that *Elizabeth Is Missing* gives supreme importance to the shaping power of the "social and interpersonal spaces" on the experience of its dementia-ridden protagonist (Sako 2016, 317). Indeed, similar to *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*, Healey's novel puts in sharp focus how old age is inextricably embedded in social scripts that clash with the aged person's inner sense of self. Surprisingly perceptive despite her ailment, Maud Horsham exhibits a lucid understanding of this socially constructed nature of old age:

> I only really need glasses for reading, but they make you wear them all the time once you reach a certain age. It's part of the uniform. How would they know you were an old duffer otherwise? They want you to have the right props so they can tell you apart from people who have the decency to be under seventy. False teeth, hearing aid, glasses. I've been given them all. (Healey 2014, 34-35)

The passage invites two comments that are crucially pertinent for the discussion to follow. First, it shows that the heroine feels expected to "conform to the image that society has formed of [her]" (Beauvoir 1972, 219), simultaneously highlighting that this image involves a superficial objectification of the elderly as the Other. Second, it evidences her dissociation from the identity of an aged person. For the heroine, it represents a "mask or a role that [she has] to accept or assume because of [her] social dependences" (Heinämaa 2014, 172) while not internalising it into her self-perception. Even if Maud is alert to the changes in her condition, she does not grasp them as signs of aging: "'I think I'm ill.' 'That's what you said last time, but there's nothing wrong with you. You're just not young any more" (Healey 2014, 31). Revealed to her from outside, old age is never fully acknowledged by her "inner being" (Beauvoir 1972, 432), which stresses her difference from other elderly persons:

> 'I'm not like my friend Elizabeth. She can barely leave the house. Her sight's poor and she's unsteady on her feet. Whereas I –' 'Whereas you are in great shape for your age. I know.' (Healey 2014, 32)

The woman also displays hardly any solidarity with her coevals, perceiving them sometimes as grotesque and ridiculous, as is the case with "these old women with flecked dentures and sooty eyelids and rouge smeared over their faces, their eyebrows drawn on too high," who are the living image of what she does not want to become (Healey 2014, 12).

While it may be true that the novel "[rejects] … the discourse of dementia as the loss of self" (Sako 2016, 25), it certainly shows how the dissonance discussed above destabilises the boundaries of Maud's selfhood. "Once upon a time in a deep, dark forest, there lived an old, old woman named Maud" (Healey 2014, 3), she says to herself from a position of critical detachment, as if referring to a third person – the Other within herself that is old, to paraphrase Beauvoir. The most acute sense of self-alienation always arises when Maud is catching sight of herself in the mirror, a motif that recurs throughout the novel (Healey 2014, 12, 53, 75-76, 202, 233), evoking associations with the elderly woman from Améry's study:

> My reflection always gives me a shock. I never really believed I would age, and certainly not like this. The skin around my eyes and the bridge of my nose has wrinkled in a very unexpected way. It makes me look quite lizard-like. (Healey 2014, 12)

The quoted passage clearly bespeaks the heroine's bewilderment at the reality of old age. Thoroughly "unforeseen" (Beauvoir 1972, 12), when confronted face-to-face, it produces an uncanny sensation, for Maud has always yielded to her "absurd inner voice [whispering] that *that* will never happen to [her]" (Beauvoir 1972, 5). Although she recognises this mirror reflection as herself, it continues to perplex her, eluding "the obvious clarity of the inward feeling" (Beauvoir 1972, 290). Later in the same place, Maud admits to having difficulties memorising her old face; when she is thinking about herself, it is images of a girl, young or middle-aged woman that spring to her mind (Healey 2014, 12). The moment of looking at herself, in turn, gives visibility to the "discrepancy between the young self she has brought along with her through the years and the self of the aging woman in the mirror" (Améry 1994, 31). The latter, unsightly as it appears, is never fully embraced as her true self.

Maud's confrontations with her own mirror reflection also poignantly

express the ambiguity of aging. Not only do they combine self-estrangement with heightened self-consciousness, but they also cast her in the double role of subject and object, as can be seen both in the previously quoted passage and in the following one:

> And then I saw it. A face looking back at me from deep in the room. I slapped a hand to the glass, shouting, before I realized what it was. My own reflection in a dressing-table mirror … (Healey 2014, 53)

On the one hand, Maud acts as an active subject-perceiver who controls the outside world with her gaze; on the other hand, she is positioned as a passive object of perception and scrutiny. This specular image represents her outer self – the self that is well-known to others but thoroughly alien to herself.

The ambiguity of being both subject and object makes itself even more painfully felt in Maud's interpersonal interactions. Stigmatised by dementia, the heroine suffers from a sense of being deprived of agency and autonomy by other people, most prominently her daughter:

> You're moving into my house.' 'So it's your rules, is it? And I have to do as you say? I don't think I want to live with you if it's going to be like this.' (Healey 2014, 201)

Much as Helen's conduct is dictated by the willingness to protect her mother, it is experienced by the latter as an encroachment upon her freedom to be a possessor her own life. "I'm surprised they let me decide for myself if I'm hungry" (Healey 2014, 132), the heroine remarks ironically at one point, demonstrating that her awareness of being reduced by society to an object without any voice of her own, no longer capable of steering the course of her life in the most trivial matters, collides with her deeply cherished sense of sovereign subjectivity. Although dementia corrodes her ability to manage her environment, this sense does not subside and incites her to oppose "the marginalization she encounters" (Sako 2016, 23) while investigating the alleged disappearance of Elizabeth. Maud is keenly alive to the condescending attitude with which society, be it police officers or her own daughter, disregards her fears and interests: "She [Helen] won't listen, won't take me seriously, imagines that I want to live in the past" (Healey 2014, 19). Far from obediently surrendering to the social pressure,

the heroine expresses her "frustrated rage" (Sako 2016, 23) at this infantilising treatment: "How dare they dismiss me, these people who are supposed to care about Elizabeth?" (Healey 2014, 82). "I'm not mad," she declares defiantly, "[a] nd I'm sick of being treated as if I am" (Healey 2014, 20), remaining steadfastly convinced about the validity of her own viewpoint. Most importantly, as underlined by Spencer Meeks, she "proves herself far from incapable" (Meeks 2020, 90). While Elizabeth has not gone missing but is staying at hospital, the heroine's efforts finally make it possible to solve the disappearance of her sister Sukey, who was murdered and buried in Elizabeth's garden years ago.

Nevertheless, as was the case with Mrs Palfrey, Maud's resolve to retain self-determining subjectivity is undermined by the transformations of old age, exacerbated by her dementia, which inhibits her active engagement with the world. With her diminished cognitive capacities, the heroine is susceptible to the boredom of watching TV, eating and waiting for her family (Healey 2014, 6). Having difficulty focusing and understanding, she can neither read books (Healey 2014, 6) nor take active part in meaningful social interactions (Healey 2014, 113). Furthermore, the external environment becomes increasingly complex and inhospitable, thwarting her everyday efforts. As her body is growing weaker and no longer amenable to serve her needs – emerging as a disturbing reminder of her own senescence – the world reveals itself a tortuous maze that she is too vulnerable to negotiate:

> I'll never find my way with the roads in a jumble like this. … I can't have walked very far, but my legs are heavy and my back's sore. I feel like an old woman. (Healey 2014, 154)

This altered way of being-in-the-world, haunted by a penetrating sense of disorientation, comes to the surface in such basic daily activities as doing the shopping. Maud meaningfully compares her way to the shop to meandering through a war-torn city, with most of the familiar landmarks having been destroyed, thus giving a striking articulation of how perplexed and imperiled she feels in the outer space (Healey 2011, 7). This space, including the shop itself, "is filled with traps" and "bristles with threats" (Beauvoir 1972, 304). First, clearly affected by what Améry would diagnose as cultural aging, the heroine is at a loss to "[find her] way in an unknown array of signs" (Améry 1994. 81): "I used to love shopping. But the shops are so different now ... So many odd colours. Who is it wears these bright

orange things?" (Healey 2014, 35). Not only does the shop bewilder her by confounding her expectations but it also creates the impression of hostility: "The loaded shelves frown down at me as I circle them, and the blue-and-white linoleum stares up, dirty and cracked" (Healey 2014, 8). Everything appears to be in excess, bombarding her with sensory stimuli that she cannot process and posing challenges that she cannot meet: "I feel as if my balance is going. … I start to think I'll be trapped here for ever" (Healey 2014, 41).

Throughout the course of the novel, the "painful feeling of insecurity" (Beauvoir 1972, 46) comes to pervade the heroine's existence to an ever greater extent as Maud's advancing dementia erodes her mental faculties. The heroine is repeatedly shown suddenly losing her way, her surroundings striking her as forbiddingly strange and inscrutable (Healey 2014, 3, 153, 219, 228), or being unable to recognise perfectly familiar places, such as her own house (Healey 2014, 219), or even her family members (Healey 2014, 194). Apart from growing defamiliarized and dislocated from the external world, Maud also becomes a stranger to herself, incapable of controlling and making sense of her own conduct: "suddenly I can't think what I'm doing here, what it is I'm looking for. For a moment I'm too frightened to move, not knowing what I might do next" (Healey 2014, 69). Even more excruciatingly, she is losing such basic skills as using fork and knife, a humiliating experience that diminishes her sense of autonomous selfhood: "A little piece of me is gone" (Healey 2014, 66). The heroine thus lives in a state of anxiety, confronting herself as "a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things" (Beauvoir 1962, 7), powerless to exercise her subjectivity.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

The article has analysed Taylor's *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* and Healey's *Elizabeth Is Missing* through the perspective of the existential-phenomenological insights provided by Beauvoir and Améry, seeking to demonstrate that both novels accord centrality to the experience of existential ambiguity, where the heroines' self-conception clashes both with their social position and the physical reality of aging. Much as their situations differ – while Mrs Palfrey is in a relatively good state of health but has been abandoned by her family, Maud suffers from dementia but is supported by her relatives – both elderly heroines discover themselves as vulnerable objects susceptible to factors beyond their control. While the heroines do not lose their sense of self, the experience of aging brings

to light its instability and non-homogeneity. Although they struggle to demonstrate their own capacity of self-determination to the world, this struggle is undermined by the physical changes inherent in the process of aging. Plagued by the decline of their body and mind, they find themselves insecure in external reality, no longer capable of meeting the challenges that it presents. Published in two different centuries, both novels are thus similar in turning the spotlight on the precarious situation of the elderly, who not only are invariably misunderstood and treated with condescension by society, but also are themselves at a loss to negotiate their own identity, being caught in between conflicting positions. The novels make a point of portraying old age as a time of existential re-orientation, where the heroines' habitual mode of being-in-the-world and self-understanding is disturbed and destabilised as they are confronting the Other within themselves.

Still, the analysis of the novels invites further research, possibly also with reference to other theoretical perspectives. First and foremost, it would be worthwhile to examine how the position of the elderly heroines is affected by their gender, a question that has not been discussed in this article for want of space. After all, Beauvoir stresses that "[o]ld age does not have the same meaning nor the same consequences for men and for women" (Beauvoir 1972, 84) and, indeed, both novels intimate that aging puts an additional strain on women, haunting them with the threat of becoming ridiculous and repulsive.[1] Furthermore, it would be expedient to delve deeper into the portrayal of old age as a social phenomenon. It has been asserted at various points that both novels represent old age and aging as firmly embedded within a social context and conditioned by it. This aspect could be elucidated further using, for instance,

---

1 In *Elizabeth is Missing*, this may be seen, for instance, when Maud, as quoted earlier in the article, describes old women as grotesque and clearly deprived of physical attractiveness: "You see these old women with flecked dentures and sooty eyelids and rouge smeared over their faces, their eyebrows drawn on too high. I'd rather die than be one of them" (Healey 2014, 12). As for *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*, it is significant to note that Ludo's interest in the elderly is limited to old women. He treats them as a separate species, animal-like and inspiring revulsion: "I needed her, for it took my fancy to write about elderly women. I used to watch them in the boarding-house when I was in Rep in Woodbury, sitting like toads in dark corners, dropping off or dozing, or burrowing down the sides of armchairs for knitting-needles" (Taylor 2011, 45). Towards the end of the novel, it is also intimated that old age deprives women of their femininity: "Opposite Mrs Palfrey, an old lady sat out of bed, in her dressing-gown. Only because of her being in *this* ward, did Ludo know that she was not a man: nearly bald she was, no suggestion of her sex about her, even the dressing-gown was grey and corded" (Taylor 2011, 188; emphasis in original).

Christine Overall's idea that old age is a thoroughly social construct, also in its "biological substratum," being "created, reinforced, and sustained, …, through human relations and practices" (Overall 2006, 126). As far as Mrs Palfrey's and Maud's uneasy wavering between resisting and being in thrall to social restrictions is concerned, interesting insights could be gained also by referencing Shelley Tremain's revision of the concept of disability from a Foucauldian point of view, as "a historically specific aggregate that comprises, constitutes, and is constituted by and through a complex and complicated set of discourses, technologies, identities, and practices" produced through various spheres of social activity (Tremain 2017, 22).

Works Cited

Améry, Jean. 1994. *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation*. Translated by John D. Barlow. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Bailey, Paul. 2011. Introduction to *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* by Elizabeth Taylor. London: Virago. Kindle.

De Beauvoir, Simone. 1972. *The Coming of Age.* Translated by Patrick O'Brian. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

De Beauvoir, Simone. 1968. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Citadel Press.

De Beauvoir, Simone. 2011. *The Second Sex.* Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books.

Gilleard, Chris. 2022. "Aging as Otherness: Revisiting Simone de Beauvoir's *Old Age*." *The Gerontologist* 62, no. 2: 286-292.

Hamilton, Christopher. 2016. "'This damnable, disgusting old age': Ageing and (Being) One's Body." In *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Aging*, 305-324. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Healey, Emma. 2014. *Elizabeth Is Missing.* New York: Penguin. Kindle.

Heinämaa, Sara. 2014. "Transformations of Old Age: Selfhood, Normativity, and Time." In *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time,* edited by Silvia Stoller, 167-189. Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter.

Martin, Alison. 2011. "Old Age and the Other-Within: Beauvoir's Representation of Ageing in *La Vieillesse*." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 47, no. 2: 126-137.

Meeks, Spencer. 2020. "Neuro-Crime Fiction: Detecting Cognitive Difference."

Crime Fiction Studies 1, no. 1: 79-95.

Miller, Sarah Clark. 2001. "The Lived Experience of Doubling: Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Old Age." In *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Wendy O'Brien and Lester Embree, 127-147. Dordrecht: Springer Dordrecht.

Overall, Christine. 2006. "Old Age and Ageism, Impairment and Ableism, Exploring the Conceptual and Material Connections." *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1: 126-137.

Sako, Katsura. 2016. "Dementia and Detection in *Elizabeth Is Missing* and *Turn of Mind*." *Contemporary Women's Writing* 10, no. 3: 315-33.

Sandford, Sara. 2006. *How to Read Beauvoir*. London: Grant Books.

Sternad, Christian. 2021. "When Time Becomes Personal. Aging and Personal Identity." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20: 311-319.

Stoller, Silvia. 2014. *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time.* Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter.

Taylor, Elizabeth. 2011. *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont.* London: Virago. Kindle.

Tremain, Shelley. 2017. *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Tyler, Natalie Christine Hawthorne. 1993. "Communities of Last Resort: Representations of the Elderly in the Contemporary British Novel." PhD diss., The Ohio State University.

Wallace, Diana. 2011. "Literary Portrayals of Aging." In *An Introduction to Gerontology,* edited by Ian Stuart-Hamilton, 389-415. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Woodward, Kathleen. 2018. "Re-reading Simone de Beauvoir's *Coming of Age*." *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3: 191-206.