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On Old Age

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since my relations with him had become pointless anyhow. I abruptly stopped going to him and sent him the last of the money I owed along with a brief note. I'm sure he wasn't surprised and had foreseen everything. I left for Turin and never saw Dr. B. again.

In Turin, in the months that followed, I would sometimes wake up at night thinking of something that might be useful in my analysis that I had forgotten to tell him. Occasionally I even found I was talking to myself in a German accent. The years went by, and if I ever thought of my analysis it was simply as one of the many things I had started and not finished, simply out of muddle, stupidity, and confusion. Much later I moved back to Rome. The place where I lived was only a little way from Dr. B.'s office, I knew he was still there and once or twice the idea came to me to drop in and say hello. But our relations had been founded on such a peculiar basis that a simple hello would not have been appropriate. I felt that the old ceremony would immediately have begun again, the table, the glass of water, the smile. I couldn't offer him friendship, I could only offer him the burden of my neuroses, but I had learned to live with the neuroses and finally I had forgotten them. Then one day I learned that Dr. B. had died. If a place exists where we are reunited with the dead, I will surely meet Dr. B. there and our conversations will be straightforward and have nothing to do with analysis, and may be even happy, tranquil, and perfect.

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On Old Age

Here we are becoming what we never wanted to become, to wit, old. Old age is something we have neither desired nor expected; and when we tried to imagine it it was always in a superficial, vague, and negligent way. It never inspired us with either a profound curiosity or a profound interest. (In the story of Little Red Riding Hood the character that interested us the least was the grandmother, and we didn't really care whether she got out of the wolf's stomach or not). The funny thing is that, even now when we are getting old ourselves, we still don't take any interest in old age. So a thing is happening to us that never happened to us to this day: up to now we have gone along year by year always filled with a lively curiosity about the changes that were taking place in our contemporaries; now we feel as though we are moving toward a gray region where we will become part of a gray throng whose affairs stir neither our curiosity nor our imagination. Our glance will remain forever fixed on youth and childhood.

What old age means in us, essentially, is the end of astonishment. We will lose the power to be astonished by ourselves or astonished by others. We will marvel no longer at anything, having spent our lives marveling at everything; and the others won't marvel at us, either because they have already seen us do our tricks or because they won't even be looking at us. What may happen is that we will become old junk forgotten among the weeds, or glorious ruins visited with

devotion; or rather we will sometimes be one and sometimes the other, destiny being thus changeable and capricious; but in neither case will we be astonished; our imagination aged by a whole lifetime will have used and worn out in its womb every possible event, every mutation of destiny; and nobody will be astonished either if we become old junk or if we become illustrious ruins; there is no astonishment in the devotion lavished on antiquity, and even less in stumbling over old junk left to rust in the nettles. And anyhow between being the one thing and the other there's no appreciable difference: because in either case the hot stream of daily life flows along other shores.

The incapacity for astonishment and the feeling of not being able to astonish will make us sink farther and farther into the reign of boredom. Old age bores and it is bored: boredom engenders boredom, spreads boredom about as the squid spreads ink. And so we prepare ourselves to be both the squid and the ink: the sea around us will be tinged with black and this black will be ourselves: we ourselves who have hated the black hue of boredom all our lives. Among the things that still astonish us is this: our essential indifference toward undergoing such a new state. This indifference is caused by the fact that little by little we are falling into the immobility of the stone.

Still we are aware that before becoming stone we will first become something else; because another thing for us to marvel at is the extreme slowness of this growing old. For a long time we go on in the habit of thinking of ourselves as "the youth" of our time; when somebody talks about "youth" we turn our heads as if they were talking about us; habits, these, so deeply rooted that perhaps we will lose them only when we are completely become stone, that is on the verge of death. Contrasted to this slowness of aging is the dizzying rapidity of the spinning world around us: the rapidity of the transformation of things and the growing-up of young people and children; amid all this spinning only we change slowly, altering faces and habits with the slowness of caterpillars: either because we detest old age and reject it with every fiber of our being even when our minds bend to it with indifference, or because the transformation of the animal into stone is a labored and tiring thing.

The world that spins and changes around us holds for us only pale traces of the world that was ours. We loved it not because we found it beautiful or just but because we gave to it our force, our life, and our astonishment. What we find before our eyes today doesn't astonish us, or at most only a little, but it flees from us and seems indecipherable: and in it we can perceive only a few pallid traces of what it once was. We hope those pallid traces will not disappear, so that we can still recognize in the present something that was once ours; but we feel that soon we will have neither force nor voice to express this wish, which is probably a puerile and ingenuous one. Except for those faint traces, the present is obscure to us, and we have difficulty getting used to this obscurity; we wonder what kind of a life ours will be if we ever manage to accustom our eyes to so much darkness; we wonder if we will not end up, in the time to come, like a bunch of frightened mice trapped in a well.

We wonder constantly how we will pass the time in our old age. We wonder if we will go on doing what we have done as young people: if for example we

will go on writing books. We wonder what kind of books we will manage to write, scuttling around blindly like mice, or later when we have fallen into the immobility of stone. In our youth they talked about the wisdom and serenity of the old. But we feel we will never manage to be wise or serene: and besides we have never really cared for serenity and wisdom, instead we have loved thirst and fever, troubled seeking and mistakes. But soon now even mistakes will be forbidden us: because, since the present is incomprehensible to us, our mistakes will refer still to those faint traces of yesteryear that are now on the point of disappearing; our mistakes about the world of today will be like letters in the sand or the rustling of mice in nocturnal flight.

The world before us, one that appears uninhabitable to us, nevertheless will be inhabited and even loved by some of the creatures we love. The fact that this world is destined for our children, and the children of our children, doesn't help us to understand it any better, instead it increases our confusion. The way our children will finally live in it and decipher it is unknown to us; and besides from the time they were children they have always told us openly that we understood nothing. So our attitude before our children is an humble one and sometimes even cowardly. Before them we feel like children in the presence of adults, caught up as we are in the gradual process of aging. Every act that our children carry out seems to us the manifestation of the utmost wisdom and competence, a thing that we ourselves have always wanted to do and for some reason have never been able to. As for us we are unable to carry out any action at all in relation to the present, because any action of ours automatically falls into the past. So we measure the immense distance that separates us from the present, we see how we would lose touch completely with the present if we were not still bound to it by the complicated and painful skeins of love. And one thing still astonishes us, we who are less and less often struck with marvel: seeing our children able to live in and decipher the present, while we go on mumbling the clear and shining words that enchanted us in our youth.
