

Old Age

I am still here¹

I was a delicate child, and to my great embarrassment I was excused from gymnastics as a teenager owing to an illness whose identity is still mystery, at least to me. That is when I acquired my world-weariness, a permanent and invincible lethargy that was to get worse with the passing years. Tiredness as a natural state has for many years been a recurring theme, when I'm complaining about life in letters and conversation. My friends consider it a bad habit of mine, almost an attempt to attract attention, and they don't take me seriously. "I'm increasingly falling apart", I recently told an old friend. He replied with a slightly mocking air: "You've been telling me that for twenty years". But the truth is – and it is difficult to explain this to anyone younger – that the descent into the void is long, much longer than I would have ever imagined, and slow, so slow as to appear almost imperceptible (although not to me). The descent is continuous and, what is worse, irreversible: you descend one step at a time, but having put your foot on the lower step, you know that you will never return to the higher one. I have no idea how many more downward steps are to follow. I can only be sure that their number is steadily decreasing.

In spite of it all, in spite of my fears and forebodings, I am still here two years after my first statement on old age, sitting at my desk in my large study whose four walls are covered with increasingly useless books. Two large windows brighten the room, one looking onto the hills and the other looking up an extremely long avenue to the mountains in the distance. It appears that nothing has changed. In reality, many things have changed over very few years, both in the world, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War and the Soviet empire, and in Italy, with the elections of 5 April 1992 and the beginning of the transition from the First to the Second Republic. And there have been changes in me: in 1988, at the approach of my eightieth year, I suffered the first afflictions of real old age, and not just the old age I had imagined and feared. My feeling at being still alive is mainly one of astonishment, almost incredulity. I cannot explain by what good fortune I have survived, or who has protected me, sustained me and taken me by the hand. I cannot understand how I have managed to overcome all the obstacles and even mortal dangers: the diseases, accidents, natural disasters and infinite misfortunes that threaten human life from the moment of birth. I often recall these words of Achille Campanile, the much-loved comic of my generation, which I read many years ago:

"I've always wondered about these old people. How come they managed to pass through so many dangers hale and hearty to reach such old age? How come they didn't end up under a motor car or succumb to a fatal disease, how come they managed to avoid roof tiles, muggings, rail crashes, shipwrecks, lightning, falls and pistol shots? . . . Truly these old people must be protected by the devil himself! Some even dare to cross the road ever so slowly. Are they mad?"²

I am mad. I am increasingly tottery on feeble legs, and I cross the road leaning on my stick and holding my wife's arm. Even my friends, with whom I have shared the same

passions, ideals and scholarly interests, do not cross the road any more, and they seem a great deal fitter than I. Fortune is blindfolded, but misfortune, my doctor son tells me, has excellent eyesight: once it has taken a dislike to some sickly soul, it will give that poor person no peace until he is completely drained of all life. Up until now, I have been protected by the lady with the blindfold, whose protégés have no cause for boasting, precisely because they were chosen entirely at random. For how much longer, I cannot say. I cannot even say whether my end will be due to chance, and thus unforeseeable and imponderable, or to destiny, and thus an event foreseen and pondered upon by a power unknown to me. I neither know nor wish to know. Chance explains too little, necessity too much. Only a belief in free will helps us to feel masters of our own lives, but it too could be an illusion. Yet, although by and large no one wishes to die (there are exceptions, but very few and they generally meet with disapproval), death comes to us all without distinction. Whether by chance or as a result of destiny, it matters little to those who die. Whether an event occurs “by misadventure”, as lawyers would say, and thus could have not occurred, or occurs by *force majeure*, and therefore could not have not occurred, the result is the same: we are exonerated from all responsibility for that event. In the case of something malign like death, the only point of attributing it to an event that was not foreseeable or to one that had been foreseen for all eternity is perhaps the consolation of saying that “you couldn’t have done anything to stop it”.

We can only speak in a considered manner of our destiny, which is by its very essence unknown and therefore shrouded in mystery (one of the many themes that philosophers have endlessly discussed), once it has been fulfilled. But once it has been fulfilled, in the very moment of its fulfilment, it is no longer a mystery. The fulfilment of mysterious destiny is, paradoxically, not at all mysterious. It is no different from any other event that occurs before our eyes every day. There is absolutely no relationship of necessity between the unknown destiny while it remains unfulfilled and the event that fulfils it. This does not stop the external observer from asserting that that which has occurred had to occur, out of our essential need to find a rational explanation for the occurrence, and it is a causal explanation that most satisfies and comforts us.

Only other people can speak of my death. I can give an account of my life using my memories and the memories of those who are close to me, as well as documents, letters and diaries. I can speak of it up to my very last minutes. But I can never speak of my death. That is up to others. We rush to give our condolences to relations of a friend. They compete with each other in their detailed accounts of how the friend has passed away, repeating the last words that possibly the dying man never heard and describing every last gesture that perhaps he was unaware of. I alone will not be able to speak of my death. My death is unforeseeable for everyone, but for me it is also unspeakable.

2. After death

What follows is even more unspeakable. What will come after? Do we really believe that something will happen that could later be described, and that one day someone will describe?

People differ a great deal. We distinguish them by endless different categories: race, nation, language, custom, intelligence, looks, health, wealth – and it would be impossible

and pointless to list them all. But I have always been astonished by how little importance we attach to a distinction that should express most profoundly their deep-rooted difference: the belief or disbelief in life after death. It is a fact that human beings are mortal. It is a belief and not a fact that death, that most tangible of events, which we see occurring around us every day and on which we never cease to ponder within ourselves, is not the end of life, but a transition to another form of life perceived and defined in different ways according to the individual, religion or philosophy. There are those who believe in this and those who don't. There are even those who do not think about it, and those, perhaps the majority, who say "Well, who knows!" Since I was a child and first started to think about the problem of death, I have always felt closer to the non-believers. What are my arguments? We could talk about it forever, but what I have never been able to accept (I admit it's a failing on my part) is the way Pascal's wager is used to bring discussion abruptly to a close. For the non-believer, the main argument is an awareness of our insignificance compared with the immensity of the cosmos, an act of humility when faced with a universe of worlds whose boundless, even immeasurable, grandeur we have only recently begun to understand.

The non-believer's response puts an end to all other questions. For the believer, on the other hand, the most agonizing questions arise from the moment in which he accepts the existence of another life after this one. Another life: but what kind of other life? As we know absolutely nothing about it on the basis of experience, a different answer is provided by every religion, every prophet or visionary, every wise man who believes or pretends to know, and all human beings, however simple, who are horrified by the idea of their own death or cannot accept the passing of a loved one. All these answers are equally credible. There is only one world, of which I only know a tiny fragment through my experience and the accumulated experience passed down over the centuries by endless thousands of people who lived before me. There are infinite other worlds that are only imagined. Plato's other world is not that of Epicurus. The other world of the Jews is not that of the Christians.

When I say that I do not believe in a second life or any further lives after that (in accordance with the belief in reincarnation), I do not mean to assert something that is incontrovertible. I merely mean that I have always found the arguments of doubt to be more convincing than the arguments of certainty. No one can be certain of an event for which there is no proof. To use the title of a recent book by Gianni Vattimo, even those who believe, only believe they believe. I believe that I don't believe.

It seems to me that anyone who has reached my age should have only one desire and hope: to rest in peace. I often recall the short prayers for the rosary, learnt as a child and repeated I know not how many times: "Grant eternal rest unto them, O Lord". These are the words that appear over entrances to Christian cemeteries. Of course, the prayer then continues: "And let perpetual light shine upon them". But perfect rest, particularly if eternal, requires not only silence but darkness. The images of rest and light are conflicting. More usually associated are those of sleep and darkness.

You cannot imagine life without death. Not unsurprisingly humans are called "mortals". Even the most cynical, dispassionate, imperturbable, contemptuous and indifferent take death seriously at some point in their lives; if not that of others, then at least their own. The only way to take it seriously is to think of it as it appears to you when you see the immobility of a body that has become a corpse: it contrasts with life which is movement.

Death taken seriously is the end of life, the ultimate end, an end beyond which there is no new beginning. Anyone who has regard for life, also has regard for death. Those who take death seriously also take life seriously, that life, my life, the only life that I have been granted, even though I do not know why or by whom. Taking life seriously means accepting firmly, coherently and as serenely as possible your own finitude. It means knowing with certainty, absolute certainty, that you have to die, that this life exists entirely within time, and within time all existing things are destined to die. Canetti has queried whether many people would discover that life is worth living, if they didn't have to die.³ The strongest argument in favour of death being the final end and death being nothing more than death, is that you only die once. The end of life is both first and the last end. Even those who argue that there is a second life after death, do not argue that there is a second death, because the second life, if it exists, is eternal and a life without death.

My death is the end of me as an individual, and it alone is an absolute end. Many things in the world of nature and in history finish in order to start again. Day is followed by night, which is followed by day again. The ancients had a cyclical vision of history, and the phase that ended one cycle was destined to reappear in the next. The cycles follow one upon the other ad infinitum, as with Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence". If death is the ultimate end, then life becomes extinct. By «extinction» we mean an end without a new start. The dinosaurs are an extinct species. The Sumerian civilization is extinct. The Seleucid dynasty is extinct. Marx believed that the state was destined to become extinct. Anything that is extinct, has finished for always. "Just as all human things have an end", wrote Montesquieu, "the state of which we speak will lose its liberty and perish. Rome, Sparta and Carthage all perished".

We know so little of this other world that everyone imagines it as befits their hopes and fears – in accordance with the dreams that have deceived them and nightmares that have tormented them, and under the influence of the teachings and doctrines to which they have been subjected. It can be a remedy for your sufferings or recompense for your unhappiness. The next world should be completely different from this world. The only thing we can be sure about is that, if it exists, it is different. But in what way is it different? Science fiction books indulge in descriptions of worlds, but they are worlds created in the image of this one, albeit with bizarre, extravagant and fanciful, although not entirely unreal, characteristics. They are worlds of the here and now, and not worlds of the hereafter.

It is impossible to portray the next world to which the part of us not destined to die is supposed to go and live after death, leaving our bodies to rot underground or to be completely destroyed in a crematorium. There are no limits to our imagination. I am curious to know how those who believe in life after death imagine it. Such curiosity is quite legitimate, for how else are we supposed to believe in something about which we have neither an idea nor an image. There are many possible replies. Apart from the one provided by our religious tradition in which the other world is the place where divine justice rewards the good and punishes the bad, one of the most common images comes from popular tradition, according to which the hereafter is where the dead meet other dead people who were most dear to them in life: the inconsolable mother is reunited with her daughter who died young, the daughter who reacquaints herself with the father who died when she was a child and of whom she only had the vaguest memory in life, or the old man who died alone in a hospice once again embraces his wife and relives the

happiest days of his life.⁴ But these simple and all too human replies betray the illusory nature of this belief. They are all replies that reveal a distressing attachment to life, and a craving for survival, compared with which survival in memories of those who knew us, loved us or held us in esteem, is a too tenuous and ephemeral consolation.

How long does memory last? Memory is so short when compared with the desire for or hope of immortality! Only a few men, who are considered great for their good or evil deeds, leave indelible memories and are in fact referred to specifically as "immortal". But what of the others, the infinite others whose memory is lost without trace?

My parents had a baby girl who was born before my brother, considered the first-born. She lived for three days, and my parents often spoke of her when we were small. Gradually, however, they spoke less of her. All that is left of that brief life is a slight trace in my memory and a tiny gravestone in the family cemetery. When I'm dead, no one will have any memory of her. If any of my children or grandchildren visit that grave in the future and read that small stone, they will wonder who she was. No one will know the answer. She came from nothing and returned to nothing within a few hours of life. Can you give a meaning and returned to nothing within a few hours of life. Can you give a meaning to that fleeting life of which I alone in the universe still retain a fading memory?

Death takes me into the world of not being, the same world that I inhabited before my birth. That void that was me knew nothing of my birth, my coming into the world and what I was to become; the void that I will be will know nothing of what I have been or of the life and the death of those who were close to me and enriched my days, and the events that caught my interest every day as I read newspapers, listened to the radio and spoke to friends. If I die before my wife, with whom I have shared more than half a century of my life, I will know nothing of her death. Not only will she die without me, but without me knowing about it. Equally I will know nothing of what will happen to my children and the children of my children, whose lives will continue beyond 2000. I will know nothing of world events, about which I have puzzled so many times vainly attempting to infer uncertain predictions. I will know nothing of the alternating periods of war and peace, or of the transformations affecting the society in which I have lived and whose vicissitudes I have witnessed and participated in with fervour.

Everything that has a beginning also has an end. Why should my life be an exception? Why should my life be any different from other events, whether natural or historical, and have a new beginning? Only that which has had no beginning, does not have an end. But something that has neither beginning nor end is eternal.

3. Slow motion

One of Erasmus's aphorisms, *Bellum dulce inexpertis*, is translated into the proverb: "He who praises war, has not stared it in the face". When I read praise of old age, with which the literature of all times is stuffed, I am tempted to alter Erasmus's expression to: "He who praises old age, has not stared it in the face". The "gay science" of geriatrics is in part responsible, albeit involuntarily and with the best intentions, for covering up the afflictions of old age. I would never challenge either its effectiveness in improving the old person's lot, to my own considerable benefit, or the nobility of its aims, which are not only the alleviation of physical suffering, but also encouragement for those entering the final stage of life, who no longer need to feel so overcome by fear of decrepitude, which

at times can be obsessive. It allows the old person to feel a winner in relation to those who died young and are the losers.

Old age is the final stage of life, mainly depicted as decadence and degeneration: the downward curve of an individual but also, in the metaphorical sense, of a civilization, a people, a race or a city. According to the cyclical interpretation, it is the moment at which the cycle finishes. Indeed, winter is depicted as a decrepit old man who trudges wearily through the snow. An old people is a people destined to be subjugated by a young barbarous people lacking a history. In the distinction between old and young, "young" represents the positive side of the whole, and "old" the negative side. Youthful Adam is contrasted with the old man who has to be reborn. The new order that should be installed is contrasted with the old order that has to be buried under its own ruins. The Old and the New Testaments. The "New World" as against old Europe. The Young Europe of peoples against the Old Europe of princes. The new bourgeois class will replace the old aristocracy, just as the new proletarian class will in turn overthrow the old bourgeois class. The passage from old to new is a sign of progress, and from new to old, of regression. To take a topical matter, will the new constitution correct the defects of the old one?

I don't deny that there are expressions in current use in which the value of the two terms is inverted, and "old" becomes a term of respect. But they are more rare: "an old head on young shoulders", "grand old man", "the old guard", "veterans who fought for their country"⁵. Hegel explained the difference between the positive and negative meanings of old age in these terms: "Natural old age is weakness; old age of the spirit, on the other hand, is perfect maturity, in which it returns to unity as the spirit".

In my experience, although it may not be the rule, old age is distinguished from youth and middle age by the slowing-down of the workings of both the body and the mind. Old people's lives unfold in slow motion. The hands and fingers move ever more slowly, and this makes it difficult to use equipment such as computers, for which agile fingers are indispensable if you are to get the most out of your machine. The legs walk ever more slowly: during my short promenades, I have come to realize (although until recently I never noticed) just how many old people like me drag themselves along the pavements, often accompanied by a younger person. Their little steps are cautious, as though they find themselves on an impracticable road full of obstacles, and not on a flat and well-paved city pavement.

There is slowness imposed by circumstance: the solemnity of a priest in a procession, the majesty of a statesman at a public ceremony or the mournfulness of pallbearers and the bereaved that follow. Every solemn occasion requires slow time: the measured gesture, the rhythmic step, the ceremonious gait, and the calculated and emotionless speech interrupted by measured pauses, each word distinct and slow to follow its predecessor. The slowness of old people, however, is distressing for themselves and painful for others to watch. It evokes forbearance rather than compassion. It is a matter of course that the old man lags behind while others push ahead. He stops and sits on a bench. He needs a bit of a rest. Those who had been behind come up to where he sits and then pass by. He would like to quicken his steps, but simply cannot do it. When he speaks, searching for words as he does so, others listen possibly with respect but nearly always with some sign of impatience.

Even one's own ideas come out of the mind more slowly, and those that do are always the same. What a bore! It is not that an old man is particularly fond of his own ideas, it is

just that he doesn't have any others. And hasn't everything been said already? Is there anything new to be said? He repeats himself without realizing it, because even the mechanics of memory have been hampered. He does not recall that he said or wrote the same thing almost in the same words the previous year, the previous month and, as the process of decadence becomes really advanced, even the previous day. He turns in on himself but also fools himself into thinking that he continues to go through life with the same boundless curiosity. Both ideas and words struggle to come out. Often when he writes and particularly when he speaks, he has the impression that his vocabulary has been impoverished, that the reservoir from which he drew the flow of his words has dried up or, for some inexplicable reason, has become inaccessible. At an age like mine, the well of memory has become so deep that I cannot see the bottom, partly because the light that shines into it has become so dim. In order to reconstruct even just a fragment of my past life, an episode I would love to tell, a conversation that once inspired me or a letter that once told me so much, I have to engage in the time-consuming business of identifying brief tracts of memory that appear and disappear like flickers of light in the dark. It is a very slow operation, and you are never happy with the end result, as there is always some piece missing from the jigsaw puzzle. I cannot remember a name that was once so familiar. I cannot even approximately rehearse arguments I once knew well. Who was there that day? And when was it anyway?

The area occupied by my explorations in various fields of knowledge is shrinking without me being entirely conscious of it. It is as though the store, where I have been accumulating knowledge through the most disparate reading and studies that for each subject lasted years and involved visiting libraries in different countries and consulting hundreds of books and documents, is suddenly full and nothing more can enter. Now when I read a new book, I find myself dwelling more on what I already knew than on what I did not know up to that point. I am more interested in the repetition of a fact or a well-known idea, which happily confirms what I learnt many years before. A new idea is almost like an unwelcome guest attempting to intrude on a place that is already overcrowded.

My readings have become more selective. It is not so much reading as rereading. In my experience, the method of selection operates in the following manner: the system of concepts you have gradually constructed, which allows you to put in order the facts and ideas offered up by years of study, tends to close itself off as you get older, as though it had reached perfection. It therefore becomes increasingly difficult to insert new facts and ideas that don't have existing pigeon-holes ready to accept them. If the information is too much, it has to be simplified to make it fit. The surplus is rejected because there is no room. On occasions you force and distort facts to make them comply with each other, and then you hear it said that you do not understand or that you are a has-been. The situation is aggravated by the rapidity of change due to scientific and technological progress: the new immediately becomes the old. Keeping up in any field requires greater mental agility than once was the case, but yours is steadily declining.

While the rhythm of life for old people is slower and slower, the time they have ahead of them decreases day by day. Those who have reached the final stage of their lives experience with varying degrees of anxiety the contrast between the slowness with which they are obliged to proceed in completing a task that consequently requires more time, and the speed and inevitability of the approaching end. The young are quicker and have

more time ahead of them. The old not only proceed more slowly, but the time remaining for the completion of any work they are engaged in, is becoming shorter and shorter.

Time is running out. I need to accelerate my movements in order to arrive on time, but I realize with every passing day that I have to move with increasing sluggishness. I take more time and I have less. I ask myself anxiously: "Will I make it?" I feel driven by the need to finish, because I know that the little time I have left will not allow me to stop for an occasional rest. Yet I am forced to strain myself while remaining stuck on the same spot, hindered in my movements and my memory lost. I am obliged to halt for taking notes on pieces of paper I will never find when the time comes to use them. They have invented wonderful instruments to assist the memory and speed up the process of writing, but I can't use them, or if I do, I use them so badly that I get no benefit. My father rode his bike after the car had been invented. I have gone back to using a fountain pen (in a manner so illegible as to exasperate my readers). On a little table next to where I write, proudly sits a computer. I am in awe of it. I haven't yet become sufficiently familiar with it to use it with the same confidence that I once used a typewriter. Like a child going to piano lessons, I need a strict schoolmistress who orders me to do half an hour of exercises.

They say that wisdom for an old person means accepting your own limitations. But to accept them, you first have to know them. And to know them, you need to find an explanation. I have not found wisdom. I know my limitations only too well, but I do not accept them. I acknowledge them, but only because I have no choice.

4. Lost opportunities

I am a child of the twentieth century. Born a few years before the First World War, I have a few very clear memories of that event: the morning that my mother, my brother and I accompanied my father to the station – he had been called up as a captain in the medical corps and was proud of the officer's uniform that he wore for the first time in his life; the celebrations for the taking of Gorizia on 10 August 1915; the flood of refugees from the Veneto region to Piedmont following the defeat at Caporetto; and in early November 1918 came the announcement of victory, sudden but not unexpected, and it was an uncle in the army who phoned to tell us.

While I am writing not a day passes without the newspapers giving further information on the celebrations for the close of the century and the start of the third millennium. The "short" century has come to an end, but it has been marked by terrible events: two world wars, the Russian Revolution, communism, fascism, nazism, the advent of totalitarian regimes for the first time in history, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, decades of the balance of terror, and then, following the fall of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War, an uninterrupted explosion of national, ethnic and tribal wars in many different parts of the world, geographically contained but brutal nevertheless. Finally, there is the elusive, incomprehensible and, for most part, unprecedented phenomenon of international terrorism, whose solution continues to evade us.

Having reached the end of this century, I am not only dismayed but also unable to give a rational answer to all the questions posed by the events I have witnessed. The only thing that I feel I have understood – but it's hardly a great discovery – is that history is unpredictable for many reasons which historians are well acquainted with but do not always take into account. Nothing is more instructive than comparing what actually

happened with the predictions, great and small alike, of famous historians who depart from an account of the bare facts. De Tocqueville's prophecy that the future destiny of the world would be entrusted to the United States and Russia has been constantly held up as a successful example, and it is one of the few that could be. But does it still apply? Who would ever have predicted the end of the communist empire in a few decades while in a few decades it had expanded its borders to central Europe and to the outer reaches of Asia? Turning to the history of my own country whose vicissitudes I have commented upon for many years, who would have predicted the sudden, rapid and decisive fall of the First Republic? I certainly failed to do so, and I believe I was not alone. Besides, I had never been able to envisage the end of the Cold War without blood being spilt, and I had always been tormented by the nightmare of nuclear warfare. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that the First Republic, which, in my opinion, was setting down to a bipartisan system that was beginning to work almost perfectly with the progressive growth of the Communist Party and its increasing independence from the Soviet Union, would crumble miserably and shamefully. Another mistaken prediction.

Historians and, more to the point, politicians who are also players in a country's history, would be well advised to compare occasionally their predictions, which also influence their behaviour, with events as they actually occur, and to assess how much and how often the former correspond to the latter. I often carry out this test on myself: it is both revealing and mortifying. It would be superfluous to say that the result is nearly always deplorable. I don't deny that it could partly depend on my natural inclination to expect the worst. Even when, very exceptionally, things turn out right, for me that is, my scepticism remains to the very last and I don't easily give in to a sense of optimism. "Why did it take so long!" is my likely reaction.

It is now too late to understand all that I would have liked and have tried so hard to understand. I have devoted a large part of my long life to reading and studying an interminable number of books and papers, even using the smallest breaks in my day. I have done so since my youth so as "not to waste time" (a genuine obsession for which I have often been jokingly reproached by friends who know me well). Now I am resigned to the unpleasant truth that I have barely reached the foot of the tree of knowledge. The most lasting satisfactions of my life have not been products of my work, in spite of the honours, prizes and public recognition – very welcome but not sought after and not desired. No, they came from relationships with other people: the teachers who enlightened me, everyone I have loved or who has loved me, and everyone who has been close to me or now accompanies me on this final stretch of existence.

As I have said, an old person lives in the past tense. And the past is relived through recollections. The great wealth possessed by the old is the marvellous world of the memory, an inexhaustible source of reflections on ourselves, the universe in which we have lived, and the persons and events that have caught our attention along the way. The wonder of this world is the unsuspected quantity and immeasurable variety of things that it contains: the images of faces that have long since disappeared, places visited in the distant past and never revisited, characters from novels read in adolescence, fragments of poetry memorized at school and never forgotten, and many, many scenes from films and plays. It contains the faces of actors and actresses who have long been forgotten but are ready to reappear whenever you wish to see them, and when you see them again, you feel the same emotions as you did the very first time. It contains endless popular songs, arias

from operas, excerpts from recitals and concerts that you replay within your mind as you accompany the rhythm and the whispered notes with imperceptible movements of your body. You can remember a particular tenor or soprano, violinist or pianist, or indeed the conductor of whose variously solemn, agitated and imperious gestures you were recently reminded when talking to a friend of the first concert you heard long ago in a grand city opera house (I am thinking here of Victor De Sabata's direction of the "New World" symphony). This immense treasure lies submerged and waits to be brought back to the surface by a conversation or printed word, or when you rummage for it while lying in bed unable to sleep. Occasionally it is produced by some involuntary association, or by some spontaneous and mysterious movement of the mind.

While the world of the future is still open to the imagination, it does not belong to you any more. The world of the past is the one in which you immerse yourself through your recollections, you turn in on yourself and reconstruct your identity that has been formed and revealed by the uninterrupted chain of actions stretching throughout your life. You judge yourself, you absolve yourself and you condemn yourself. When your life is coming to a close, you can even attempt to draw up a final balance sheet. But you must hurry. An old person lives on memories and for memories, but the memory weakens day by day. The memory's time proceeds in the opposite direction to real time: the most vivid memories are recalled for the most distant events. But you also know that what remains, what you have managed to draw back up from the bottomless well of memory is only the tiniest part of the story of your life. Don't stop there. Never cease delving deeper and deeper. Every face, every gesture, every word, every distant song, seemingly lost but now rediscovered, will help you survive.

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(translated from the Italian by Allan Cameron)

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Editors note

A longer version of this text was first published in the French version of *Diogène*, N°190, PUF, December 2000 pp. 101–25, under the title. "Au ralenti, Vieillesse, Mémoire, Mort".

Notes

1. The author was nearly 87 when he wrote these words. [Ed.]
2. A. Campanile, *Opere*, ed. by O. Del Buono (Milan: Bompiani, 1989), Vol. II, pp. 1470–71.
3. [Elias Canetti, *The Conscience of Words*, translated from the German by Joachim Nengroschel, New York, Seabury Press, 1979.] [Ed.]
4. In a dialogue between two old people who write to each other and give accounts of their lives and thoughts, she says to him: "If only I could think like Madame Chevreuse, who when she was dying, believed that she was about to speak to all her friends in the other world, it would be a wonderful thought" – Ninon de Lenclous, *Lettere sulla vecchiaia. Corrispondenza con Saint-Evremond*, ed. by D. Galateria (Palermo: Sellerio, 1994), p. 90.
5. Cf. M. Cesa Bianchi, *Psicologia dell'invecchiamento. Caratteristiche e problemi* (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1987). Right at the beginning, after pointing out the negative connotations of the term "getting old", the author observes that there are exceptions. He gives the example of some wines and the maturation of cheese.