CARMEN CONCILIO (ED.)

IMAGINING AGEING

REPRESENTATIONS OF AGE AND AGEING IN ANGLOPHONE LITERATURES

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Imagining Ageing
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What do literary texts tell us about growing old? The essays in

this volume introduce and explore representations of ageing and old age in canonical works of English and postcolonial literature. The contributors examine texts by William Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Julian Barnes, Thomas Kinsella, Seamus Heaney, J.M. Coetzee, Alice Munro, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace and, together with a medical study, they suggest solutions to the challenges arising from the current demographic change brought about by ageing Western populations.

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Editor's Introduction

CARMEN CONCILIO, UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

The present volume explores some literary representations of ageing in British and Anglophone literature. The authors and the texts studied are *exempla* for various reasons. Licia Canton, one of the Italian creative voices in Montreal, provides in her *Preface: Ageing in a Faraway Land* a moving portrait of first and second generation Italian migrants to Canada. Their getting older means to observe – from a window, from a park bench – how their own children have grown up, how someone else is taking care of his/her own grandchildren, how life suddenly might turn into waiting for a visit, when the children and grandchildren move on in their lives. Sometimes, loneliness makes two souls closer, talking about culinary affinities, some Italian specialties to possibly taste together and share.

One tragically emblematic relationship between a father and his children is certainly Shakespere's *King Lear*. Paolo Bertinetti, having dedicated his life-scholarly work to English drama, presents Lear as a model of an un-wise old man, who stumbles upon one mistake after another. His fondness to his favourite daughter, Cordelia, is also his doom, his 'dotage'. After the capital sin of renouncing his sovereignty, and the fracturing of his reign in favour of his two undeserving daughters, his body weakens and his mind vacillates to the point of being suspected of what we now would call 'dementia', as defined by Enrica Favaro in this volume. According to Shakespeare's parallel plots, misplaced trust also tragically drags Gloucester, another father, to his ruin. Bertinetti stresses how Lear is an old man whose views on politics and life are untenable and therefore wiped out by his profiteering daughters. Yet, Lear is contextualised in Shakespeare's wider production, from his *Sonnets*, where ageing is often

(but not always) connoted in negative terms, to history plays and comedies, where Falstaff provides a more complex portrait of an old man.

Lucia Folena, a scholar in early modern English literature, starts by illustrating how the Old Man is a recurrent figure in medieval narratives. He is generally a secondary character who assists the protagonist by advising him and explaining the 'actual' meaning of events and encounters. She further examines how, in the novel, as defined by the first full-fledged example of the genre, *Robinson Crusoe*, the Old Man's counselling is turned into a necessary starting point of the narrative, in terms of something that needs to be rejected in order for the story to exist. Neither the protagonist nor the reader may now accept that kind of guidance. To both of them the novel opens up territories which they must needs discover for themselves, no matter how often those regions have already been explored by their elders. Finally, Folena demonstrates how 'Form' and the power of interpretation are no longer legacies to be handed down from one generation to the following: they have turned into the very goals of their protagonists' quests.

With a time-leap from early modern English Literature to 2011 Booker Prize winner, Pier Paolo Piciucco introduces *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes. Piciucco frames within postmodern parameters an anti-hero, who seems to finally understand – retrospectively – what really happened in his whole life only later in his life age. The tragic death of his best friend, his relationship with his best friend's fiancé, and his former fiancé, all these are facts lived through almost without consequences. Those same facts slowly clear up when the older self makes an assessment and comes to terms with his younger self. Getting older implies here a splitting of the subject, for the older judge puts the younger culprit under trial. Ageing is modelled as a retrospective looking back to a life that has not necessarily been exemplary, and to avoid a traditional and consolatory happy ending, this looking back involves neither remorse nor repentance. The villain, after all, remains ambiguously and ironically indifferent to revelations and redemption.

Assessment of one's life, "sense of one's life" is also the object of Thomas Kinsella's *Late Poems*. The Irish studies scholar, Donatella Badin, reads Kinsella in light of the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio's essay *De senectute*. Both men, the Irish poet and the Italian intellectual, in their old age, resort to memory as an hermeneutic and philosophical tool to comprehend their past lives, writings, activities, and ideals. Ageing in their

case does not so much imply a retrospective look, but rather an inner look in order to reach knowledge of the self. Beneath the scrutiny of Kinsella's everyday and past life and relationships, including love for his wife, surfaces the memory of the mythical past of Ireland. The mood of these poems, self-published as a sort of journal before being turned on to major publishing houses, is not one of grievance but of appreciation for the gift of understanding. One may detect a certain circular pattern in his life-series of poems, that seem to reconfirm already well-established and recurrent themes to the point of revisiting titles and poems of the past. Finally, in taking stock of their lives, both Bobbio and Kinsella exorcise through their writings weakness, physical impairments, thoughts of illness and death. Yet, their literary exploration of ageing shapes a robust, agnostic and articulate corpus bridging to the future.

In Ireland the voice of another bard pays tribute to the physical impairments that characterize old age: 1995 Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney. Irene De Angelis, a scholar in Irish studies too, analyses a late collection of the bard's poems, *Human Chain*, where Heaney comes to terms with a stroke that hit him while visiting friend poets and participating in a party. This experience is however lyrically translated into imagery of re-awakening for the renewal of life coincides with a revived creative impetus. Thus the poet resorts to a more intimate tone, dedicating his lyrics to the loved ones, particularly to his own old father, now almost identifying with him. Also artists and friends, already passed away, find space in his verses, portraits of elderly people, partly disabled by ageing, but all firmly determined in their life. The poet then dedicates a final thought to his grandchildren teaching them to flying kites over a hill, as his father did with him, in a poem reminiscent of a similar poetic composition by the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli. Heaney's subtle irony, capacity of renewal and flights of joy are exemplary of a process of ageing that goes hand in hand with a poetic creativity that sees death as a possibility.

As a postcolonial studies scholar, I based my contribution on a reading of 2013 Nobel Prize winner Alice Munro's best-known short story *The Bear Came Over the Mountain* and of its transposition into a film, by the Canadian director Sarah Polley, *Away from Her* (2006). In this case ageing is emblematically represented by a woman who chooses a retiring home where to spend her last days for she is affected by Alzheimer's Disease. Both the short story and the film pivot around two elderly couples, their different choices, their different social status and material conditions, their

encounters inside and outside the clinic. These two mononuclear families demonstrate how ageing affects lonely people in contemporary societies, where there is no longer a sense of a community. While the short story attributes a strong agency to Fiona, the main protagonist, the film seems to pick on that to stress how all the four characters involved, disabled or not, manage to articulate their agency till the very end. Dealing with the ineluctability of Alzheimer's, Munro could but create for her character an exit "with a little grace".

A similar exit with grace is imagined by J.M. Coetzee for his older women-protagonists: Elizabeth Costello and Mrs Curren. Blossom Fondo, working with the theoretical tools of ageing studies within a postcolonial framework, and writing from Cameroon, establishes a relationship between gerontology and literary postcolonial works, an area still to be explored and to be emancipated from marginality. Analysing the works of 2003 Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee, Fondo articulates her relevant thesis. Coetzee's elderly women protagonists produce an increasing firm ethical stance, a sort of shield to the current corruption that might be inversely proportional to their weakening bodies. To Coetzee, old age, both in apartheid-torn South Africa and in contemporary scientific and academic enclaves, seems to be an armour of solid moral and humanist principles. Both Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello* and Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* acknowledge the rights of respectively non-humans and despondent others with lucid inflexibility, holding ethical agency against their own various physical invalidity.

Mrs Curren and *Age of Iron* are further object of study in my second essay, whose interest in South African literature goes back to my majoring with a dissertation on J.M. Coetzee. This time, Coetzee's 'portrait of an old woman' is referred back to Virginia Woolf's Modernist masterpiece, *Mrs Dalloway*, where surprisingly, metaphors, iconic images and discourses on ageing women reverberate with striking and even unexpected affinities. Acknowledging Coetzee's indebtedness to Modernism also means here to compare ageing processes across time, cultures and urban geographies, opening up ageing studies to postcolonial countries.

Paola Della Valle, a scholar in New Zealand and Oceania studies shows how Aotearoa New Zealand appears as a particularly meaningful example of how ageing can become an issue of an on-going negotiation of cultural concepts, social practices, ideals and behaviours between social and ethnic

groups: the Pākehā and the Māori communities, whose philosophies, healing practice and experience, but also ageing processes differ enormously. This process is evident in the rise of distinct Māori-defined frameworks for health, well-being and positive ageing that appeared in response to the 'Positive Ageing Strategy' (PAS) – an official government Decalogue of best practices to empower older people in Aotearoa New Zealand – in order to comply with Māori needs and views on ageing. From Māori culture and literature, particularly from the works by Māori writers Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace, we learn that old age is endowed with a moral stance, a political vision and is treasured as a repository of ancient knowledge, philosophy, beliefs. Old age is neither isolated nor marginalized, for intergenerational transmission and contact are encouraged and are normal best practices among the Māori people. Both the community and single individuals benefit from the well-being of all its members including ageing and aged people.

Enrica Favaro, a scholar in Medical science and responsible for a programme of well-being for seniors at the University of Turin, called "Terzo Tempo / Third Time" – including multidisciplinary laboratories with activities aiming at increasing awareness about ageing processes and encouraging good practices to achieve well-being – offeres an informative contribution listing and illustrating major impairments, disabilities, illnesses and pathologies affecting elderly people. Moreover, this scientific contribution has the merit of highlighting certain features – both physical and psychological – of the literary figures met in the first part of the present volume, from Lear's senility to Heaney's light stroke, to Fiona's Alzheimer's, to Mrs Curren's terminal cancer.

Thus, this volume creates a fruitful cross-fertilization and an interdisciplinary connection among literary studies, ageing studies, postcolonial studies, and medical studies. Touching countries such as Canada, England, Ireland, South Africa, New Zealand and Italy, it might be an effective instrument in the didactics of English and Postcolonial literature, particularly in academic courses that take into account gender and ageing studies. A culturally aware critical and theoretical approach allows this volume a certain versatility and multidisciplinarity in terms of its use, while offering a wide perspective on outstanding writers of both the past and present literary canon, it might give doctors (literary) descriptions of symptoms, illnesses, healing processes to work on.

Apart from keeping oneself healthy and fit, eating sensibly, resorting to medical care and becoming more aware of what expects us all when ageing and what is expected from us in our contemporary societies, some best practices have been mentioned. For instance, Licia Canton hints at projects that involve seniors on University Campuses, so that they can enjoy the company and presence of youths. A similar project was launched in Italy, too, encouraging elderly people to rent their spare room to students, who in exchange should accompany them in their daily errands such as shopping or buying medicines. While the experiments in Canada and in the Netherlands seem to work well and provide benefits in terms of well-being, in Italy the results of such a project have not been assessed yet.

Another prize-worthy initiative are the so-called healing gardens for Alzheimer's patients, based on gardening activities that have a double effect, that of keeping fit and that of providing a pleasant aesthetic experience. Many more examples could be mentioned, but ageing processes vary according to innumerable variables, depending on genetics, geography, social status, income, gender and education.

While talking about experimental clinics that offer various forms of both medically-based and/or socially-oriented types of therapies, there are countries where all this is still a dream, if the internationally renowned South African artist William Kentridge could still write, in 2010: "Pensioners still get taken over the hills of Kwa-Zulu Natal in wheelbarrows to the pension office to get their pensions every month and are wheeled back home over the hills by their nephews or grandsons or whoever they are." (2017: 46)[1] He stressed how this image, which strikes as surprising, is also 'authentic', that is to say its specificity is stronger than what an artist could invent. This last iconic example clearly shows how ageing, even in the present era promoting medical, sports and cultural campaigns of awareness and information, is a right we might aspire to, particularly now that life-expectancy has increased enormously. Ageing is and should primarily be a matter of 'social justice'.

Carmen Concilio,
Turin – June 1, 2018

1 Cp. *Footnotes for the Panther. Conversations between William Kentridge and Denis Hirson*, Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2017.

Preface

Ageing in a Faraway Land

LICIA CANTON, MONTREAL

Ageing is something that concerns me daily. I ponder the brown spots on my hands and the tinsel growing in my hair. I am attuned to the increasing aches and pains as I approach sixty. On a recent trip to Turin, the jet lag lasted much longer than usual upon my return home to Montreal. I wonder how much of this is due to the fact that I am getting older.

In April, I had the pleasure of leading a writing workshop with students at the University of Turin. When I asked them to share the name of a person that they look up to, I was particularly struck by a quiet blond girl in the last row. "My 94-year-old grandfather," she said proudly. "He is the man I admire and respect the most." She went on to list the characteristics that make her grandfather an impressive role model.

Like that student, I am very aware of the contribution that the elderly have made to my generation and to my children's. I was born in Italy and raised in Canada, and I am particularly sensitive to the condition of retired immigrants. They left their homeland to pursue opportunities in a foreign country, whose hosts were not always welcoming. Those who left post-World War II Italy were mostly uneducated labourers. They emigrated from small rural towns where everyone knew each other and settled in big urban centres, where they were practically invisible. They made a comfortable living as simple construction workers or piece workers in clothing factories. They saved their pennies to buy that first house and to send their children to university. Now in their seventies, eighties or nineties, they wait for their (grand)children to visit. Old age is a time of rest

for them, but it is also a very lonely period. When the grandchildren were small, the grandparents played a vital role: they accompanied their grandchildren to and from school, helped them to do homework, and often made them dinner before the parents arrived to take them home. Many of the elderly who gave their time to the young ones are not getting the same in return.

Years ago I wrote the poem "Chi non viene" (2006), self-translated into French as "Ceux qui ne viennent pas," to honour my 90-year-old grandmother who spent her day waiting for visitors. And in my most recent collection, *The Pink House and Other Stories* (2018), the first and last of the fifteen stories act as bookends, an acknowledgement to the first generation immigrants who are now seniors in their adopted land. The first story, "Watching Them Laugh," is about the special relationship between a grandmother and her granddaughter and the laughter they share when they are together. In the last story, "The Motorcycle," an eighty-year-old man renews his motorcycle license. The man is hard of hearing, he walks very slowly, and he falls asleep in the waiting area. He may never ride the motorcycle again, but he is adamant about renewing his license just in case his granddaughter (who is in university) needs his help to learn to ride a motorcycle. He cannot let go of his need to be useful.

Elizabeth Cinello's short story "Food Companion Wanted" (2011) is an ode to the elderly: those who mistakenly think that they have no purpose in society. Two lonely seniors, Alberto and Nina, come together because of their love of food – the genuine staples of their Italian heritage. During a conversation on a park bench, their sense of uselessness is replaced by a mutual culinary communion. Away from Toronto's urban traffic, Nina and Alberto meet in a green space which recalls their country of origin. The meeting in the park is about negotiating an arrangement that would improve their present reality on both counts: Alberto "wants to eat again" for he has not had a good meal since his wife's passing. Nina wants to escape her daughter's ultra-urban household, where no one speaks to her, where she feels isolated and useless.

Twenty-five years ago, as a soon-to-be mother, I moved to a new home in St. Leonard (on the island of Montreal) – a well-to-do neighbourhood with many retired first-generation Italian immigrants. Back then, the bocce courts were always full. Summer evenings I pushed the stroller around the park and stopped to listen to the bocce players, men and women, who spoke

Italian or dialect as they excitedly discussed their performance or argued about the distance between the bocce. The last time I walked by the bocce court a few nights ago, the lights were on, but there was no one there. And yet, the weather was mild. There should have been players on the court. The truth is that many of them have passed away, and the others may be too old to play. Their decreased mobility is keeping them at home, thus reducing the likelihood of human interaction, and increasing their isolation and loneliness.

When I moved into my corner house in St. Leonard, there were two elderly couples living on either side. Each couple had three adult children, but I noted that they did not visit very often. My neighbours were proud to introduce their children whenever they did visit. They explained that their children had very busy lives, demanding jobs or they lived too far away.

Summers, these elderly neighbours watched my children play in our backyard. They came out to chat about how tall the children had grown or how well behaved they were. When my daughter played the flute on the balcony, the neighbours took their chairs to their own balconies to listen. Her practice sessions became mini-concerts. Then, about ten years ago, one couple sold their house and moved to a retirement home. And, from my kitchen window, I could see that the other neighbour kept the light on, day and night. She had been a widow for two years. She felt more comfortable with the lights on. She confessed that she had no reason for living after her husband died. She, too, sold the house and went to a seniors' residence.

Now, there is a young family living next door. I have watched the young couple have one, two and three children. Summers they play on the swings and the seesaw; they run around the yard under the watchful eye of a parent. Winters they build snowmen and high mountains of snow, then come sliding down.

When I am alone, I let go of the tears as I watch the little children play from my kitchen window. I miss those days with my own children. Watching the neighbours' children playing takes me back to my thirties. And yes, it is a reminder that I am ageing. That is what the tears are for: the passing of time, the inability to stop the speedy process, the inevitability of the life cycle. I am now the one watching the neighbours' children playing, and soon I will yearn for my own adult kids to come visit.

There is a special relationship between the young and the elderly. I see it in my own family: there is nothing that the grandchildren can do wrong in

the eyes of their grandparents … and vice versa. And yet they are at polar opposites. My grown children are open-minded and inclusive. Their immigrant grandparents are products of their generation with the customs, traditions and codes of behaviour that they took to Canada when they left Italy in the 1950s and 1960s. But hugs are universal.

They say that the last phase of life is similar to the first: as one reaches the end of life, there is a regression towards childhood. Some communities have seen the benefits of bringing seniors and children together. They have put preschools in nursing homes so that the elderly benefit from the presence of youth and the children learn to interact with the aged and the disabled. In an article titled "The Preschool Inside a Nursing Home," Tiffany R. Jansen writes that "Numerous studies have linked social interaction with decreased loneliness, delayed mental decline, lower blood pressure, and reduced risk of disease and death in elders. Socializing across generations has also been shown to increase the amount of smiling and conversation among older adults…".[1]

Jansen goes on to say that "kids who have early contact with older people are less likely to view them as incompetent – and simply exposing children to positive depictions of elders makes them less likely to exhibit ageism. These intergenerational interactions also enhance children's social and personal development." In Deventer, The Netherlands, university students are offered free lodging in a retirement home in exchange for keeping the elderly company for 30 hours per month. It is part of a project "aimed at warding off the negative effects of ageing."[2] And at the Université de Moncton, New Brunswick, a retirement complex with 65 residents was opened on the university campus.[3]

Through the Canadian Mental Health Association of Toronto, I have visited groups of seniors to speak about healing through writing and to engage them in literary activities. They are lonely. They need to talk. They

1 Cp. (https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/01/the-preschool-inside-a-nursing-home/424827/). Last Accessed May 28, 2018.

2 Cp. *PBS News Hour*, April 5, 2015, (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/dutch-retirement-home-offers-rent-free-housing-students-one-condition). Last accessed May 28, 2018. Web.

3 Cp. *Maclean's*, Feb. 10, 2018, (https://www.macleans.ca/education/seniors-universite-moncton/). Last accessed May 28, 2018. Web.

need to share their stories. Although I listen patiently for as long as I can, it is not enough. And when I am obliged to excuse myself in order to move on with the rest of my day, I always feel guilty about leaving them.

I would like to think that most of our senior citizens are leading a serene existence and that they smile as they reflect on their experiences, accomplishments and relationships. I would like to think that they have a strong sense of pride in the last phase of life, even though the decades have whizzed by, loved ones have passed away, and they've had to slow down due to physical deterioration. When I think of the elderly, I think of their vulnerability. But I also think of their wisdom and experience, and how much we could learn from them if we took the time to do so.

Licia Canton
Montreal, May 2018

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