

## Editor's Introduction

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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 Shakespeare'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 – offers 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 multidisciplinary 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)<sup>1</sup> 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*

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