

# Conversation: *Literature and Ageing*

*Chris Gilleard, Elizabeth Barry, and Margery Vibe Skagen*

In the category “Review Response,” *Age, Culture, Humanities* features diverse, sometimes conflicting, views within age studies and assessments of the research carried out in the field. This article takes Elizabeth Barry’s and Margery Vibe Skagen’s 2020 anthology *Literature and Ageing* as a case in point to raise questions about some of the central tenets and approaches in the study of literature and aging. Most importantly, as the title suggests, the edited collection promises a clearer understanding of the relation between literature and ageing.

In the first section, Chris Gilleard offers his thoughts on the anthology and its essays. He raises a number of critical questions that, so we (in our capacity as co-editors of *Age, Culture, Humanities*) felt, address issues that are not only relevant to the anthology but are of larger importance to the field of age studies: What can literary studies – with its different methods and theories – add to the study of age and aging?

In order to enable a generative conversation about these questions, we invited the editors Barry and Skagen to write a response to Gilleard’s critique. It constitutes the second section of this article and, rather than defend their work, Barry and Skagen clarify what is, in their view, the role of literature in age studies.

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***Literature and Ageing***, edited by Elizabeth Barry with Margery Vibe Skagen. Boydell and Brewer, 2020. Pp. 231. £30 (hardcover); \$24.99 (electronic).

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This edited volume is number 73 in the series of “Essays and Studies” published on behalf of the English Association. The collection of eight essays is fronted by an introductory chapter by the two editors and ends with an Afterword by the well-known age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette. Its literary focus is upon contemporary writing – from Wendy Mitchell’s memoir

*Somebody I Used to Know* (2018) to P.D. James' novel *The Children of Men* (1993) – with two exceptions, namely Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* (1901) and Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958).

Most of the chapters can be read as reflections upon age or some aspect of aging, triggered by a particular memoir, novel, or play. The volume as a whole treads warily in seeking to delineate what exactly defines this genre of 'literary gerontology' and how it relates to both age and literary studies. It offers instead the point made by Margaret Gullette in her "Afterword" that "every time literary and cultural studies move into a new area ... the results for the investigators and the fields have been bracing" (196). Moving into the field of aging, then, can be understood as offering new challenges for literary studies. And what of aging studies? Do these encounters with literary studies offer a similar boost, a similar challenge in thinking about age and aging?

As Barry and Skagen note, exploring old age and its representation within literature is a relatively recent tradition, developed particularly by one of the contributors, Kathleen Woodward in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Simone de Beauvoir's book *Old Age* (1977) is perhaps the originary classic, drawing as it did so much from the portrayals of aging in literary memoirs, biographies, and novels, albeit with a more singular point in mind. Sarah Falcus has argued that the potential for literary gerontology has grown and is now beginning not only to interrogate but to change "the discourses of age" (58).

Hers is an optimistic reading – reflecting the optimism that pervades many of the essays in Barry's and Skagen's book. The richness of literary accounts and their capacity to convey nuance and subjectivity far exceeding the capacity of the social sciences is not to be denied. Nor is the diversity of literary forms and themes reflecting on the experiences of growing older. This diversity is well represented in this volume. But whether such reflections and re-imaginings change society, or rather reflect how society is changing itself, is perhaps open to debate.

One of the first individual essays is by Kathleen Woodward whose reflective analysis of Margaret Drabble's 'latest' novel, *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016), focuses on the novel's bifurcation between the subjective reflections on the principal

character's 'benign' later life and the curt and objective record of her death. These are themes that Drabble has presented elsewhere but which Woodward turns to a different purpose as she ends up losing the empathy she felt for Drabble's main character, Francesca Stubbs, and her rather narrow concerns over her own future aging. Faced with the pervasive threat to all forms of life on this planet, Woodward cries out to Francesca to "stop obsessing about ageing; there is work to do!" (60). Quite. But how else do we measure time if not by the narratives of our lives and how else do we overcome the limitations of the one to better address the enormity of the other.

The focus of Drabble's novel contrasts markedly with Matthew Thomas's novel *We Are Not Ourselves*, the subject of Elizabeth Barry's chapter. Here she explores the conceptualizations of self and personhood evident in the novel and the sense that individuals exist as a multiplicity of characters and subjectivities with no one way of becoming or being aged. For Barry this warns against pigeon-holing accounts of age associated cognitive impairment into examples of "tragic irony" (131), reflecting on the decay of human reason; other meanings are always possible and no way of "living with dementia" should be assumed, nor indeed should dementia itself be represented through one lens.

Sarah Falcus' essay on the place of age and generation in dystopian fiction and the sense of lateness often embedded in such contemporary novels takes a different tack, though reflecting again the non-normativity of age both as imagined and as experienced. She focuses upon two dystopian novels, one of which, *The Last Children of Tokyo*, provides an account of a future Japan surrounded by depleted nature and dominated by 'super-aged' citizens who look after a generation of children growing up weak and unaware of the richer and resourceful childhood that Yoshiro, the great-grandfather and chief protagonist of the novel, once enjoyed and still embodies. What Falcus describes as the "repurposing" of aging evident in this and the other novel she discusses (*The Children of Men*) represent, in her view, "ways [of representing ageing] that are fundamentally more open and challenging" (83).

This optimistic reading is exemplified again in Peter Valeur's essay on "Happiness in Old Age" as reflected in Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*. Despite

the near universal judgement that Beckett is no advocate for, nor indeed seemed very little interested in happiness, Valeur sets out his proposal that Krapp is “still happy” “and enjoying himself” because he has accepted the multiplicity of selves by which we are constituted (168-9). I was curious to see how such a reading – that “old age might be a way to prepare for another life” and Krapp re-framed as offering “passwords of hope” to the future (186) – would be developed. Beckett was long fascinated by the gravitational pull of “the fourth age” but his fascination was scarcely presaged upon achieving happiness. Having read and re-read the chapter several times, I found little to challenge my view that deep old age afforded Beckett the possibility no more and for a moment at least of glimpsing into the abyss as his remaining neurons fired their last “sighs of relief” (Beckett 639; also see Gilleard in issue 3).

A more complex picture is explored in Helen Small’s essay “On Not Knowing How to Feel.” The novel she discusses is Alice LaPlante’s *Turn of Mind* (2012), a detective story that interrogates the nature of crime, of dementia, and of agency and guilt. Small has chosen this story to illustrate the ambivalence and deep unknowability surrounding mental decline in later life. Whether this inquiry represents a detective story and what it is that might be detected, Small suggests, is an open question. But it offers a kind of rational approach with which to confront a difficult ending, of not wanting not to know, even as such knowledge lies beyond reach.

Two essays in this volume fit least well with the “age and aging” theme, perhaps because both want to interweave it with other equally weighty issues, namely imperialism and post-colonial developments. I am not sure if either is enhanced by this juxtaposition. Since there are innumerable novels, plays, and poems where age and agedness figure – directly or indirectly –, the inclusion of these essays raise the question how one should determine the selection of material. Why this author, this novel, this poem, this particular play?

The editors would argue that their aim was not to pre-determine the route literary gerontology should take nor the texts it should draw on. Rather, they are “seeking to explore the way that literature represents and critiques the various parallel stories of age” (5). Such a multiplicity of narratives of aging

reflects the multiplicity of lives spent in the space of “age” and in the time of “later.” Such multiplicity however belies the existence of certain underlying tropes about aging which shape the way we see others around us, the way we see ourselves and the wider frames in which aging characters are positioned. While it may be unreasonable to demand some underlying theoretical structure(s) for literary gerontology, the absence of a rationale for selection criteria risks revealing only the sense of endless stories of endless endings. While not denying difference, if all there is is difference, what difference does that make to our imaginaries of aging and the practices that are shaped by them?

This volume contains several eloquent essays on the place of aging in human life and society but, despite the editors’ support for exploration, there was for me no map and some ventures seemed to me to be leading nowhere. What I did find encouraging, however, was that the most rewarding essays were those by the most senior scholars. Age does not only take away; sometimes it adds.

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## A Map with Open Borders, response by Elizabeth Barry and Margery Vibe Skagen

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In his review of *Literature and Ageing*, Chris Gilleard notes the range of approaches to aging offered by this new collection and identifies the interest that the topic has to literary study. He also asks how far it can have an impact for gerontology and the discourse of aging. He concludes that, although the collection includes “several eloquent essays on the place of ageing in human life and society, [...] there was for me no map,” and observes an absence of explicit selection criteria which “risks revealing only the sense of endless stories of endless endings.” The introduction to the collection, we would contend, does set out in some detail how the field of literature and aging has emerged, and what it might currently look like – a map of sorts, then, but one that is descriptive rather than normative; one in which the borders remain open. Gilleard’s perplexity regarding the volume’s explorative diversity invites us, however, as literary scholars working on the topic of aging to revisit our disciplinary position. How can plays and poems and novels make a difference for society’s practical and theoretical conceptions of old age? What do literary studies have to offer gerontology besides “endless stories of endless endings”?

### **LITERATURE AND AGING OR LITERARY GERONTOLOGY?**

The authors of these essays apply a range of interpretative tools and theories to their chosen texts, drawing on traditional literary exegesis as well as interdisciplinary cross-readings, intersectionality, and cultural studies. Not all of them would identify with the disciplinary label “literary gerontology.” Rather than referring to a subdiscipline of gerontology, the title *Literature and Ageing* may be associated with those branches of literary studies that focus on the interaction between literature and other knowledge areas: literature and science in the Anglophone tradition, *littérature et savoirs* in the French.

Accordingly, one general aim of this collection would be to investigate how knowledge of the subject matter has developed (and continues to unfold) within the ongoing dialog between literature and the sciences of old age, highlighting assimilations and problematizations, the construction and reconstruction of knowledge, and the critical interweaving of this knowledge in literary and gerontological discourses. In this sense, the juxtaposition of literature and aging suggests interdisciplinary equality and reciprocity: not just literary studies serving the aims of gerontology but critical and productive encounters between independent disciplines – which only a few decades ago hardly had anything to do with each other – providing new insights and new areas of inquiry for both. It may be that readers from different disciplines find different approaches here congenial – a review by a prominent Norwegian literary scholar (Stene-Johansen 2021) singled out for praise just those articles that left Gilleard as a social scientist cold – but this argues to us as editors for the success rather than the failure of a broad and inclusive approach.

### **THE MEDIATION BETWEEN SCIENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY**

In Helen Small's contribution to the edited volume, a returning theme is the opposition that moral philosopher Mary Mothersill identifies in her late life lecture on "Old Age," between, on the one hand, the social, economic, demographic, and medical data produced by the sciences of old age and, on the other hand, our "first-person outlooks." This conflict is also pursued in Small's reading of Alice LaPlante's novel *Turn of Mind*. How can we reconcile the depressing statistical facts about aging with the hope that our own future will be exceptional? We don't know how to feel about old age, Small and Mothersill seem to agree, because of this "mismatch of perspectives." Small's analysis of emotion and rationality in LaPlante's dementia novel suggests how literature can offer mediation between alienating scientific prognoses and the aging subject's personal expectations and experience. But there is no solution to this problem: "The best we can hope for may be [...] a timely articulation of quite proper forms of perplexity, ambivalence, conflict" (Small 34).

This dilemma of perspectives is not reserved for the aged. It resonates as something emblematically human, perhaps related to our incapacity, as Freud claims, of imagining our own death, although aging inevitably brings the problem to the foreground. A sentence from Beckett's *Endgame* comes to mind: "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on." We acknowledge that we grow frailer as we age, steadily realizing the proverbial frailty of the human<sup>1</sup> and, yet, we cannot grasp the end we share with all living beings. It's the kind of paradox literature and literary criticism thrive on but of what use is this for gerontology?

### REPRESENTING THE IRREPRESENTABLE HUMAN

In her essay "Precarious Life," Judith Butler presents Levinas's notion of the other's face and the inexplicable moral claim it makes upon us when revealing – without words – the other's "extreme precariousness" (Butler 134).<sup>2</sup> According to Levinas, we encounter "the face of the other before death, looking through and exposing death," and the sense of responsibility for this other awakens in us with the command "Thou shalt not kill" (Butler 131-132).<sup>3</sup> Not because we are charitable but because the face foreshadows something radically other and unknown, beyond objectification. It is the irreducible and irrepresentable human that we can only seek to represent by showing how its representation always fails. In this sense, our collection makes recourse to the "human," as Butler does, not as an uncritical or untheorized category but one embedded in recent philosophical and critical traditions that focus on embodiment, precariousness, vulnerability, and intersubjective dependency as fundamental aspects of human existence.

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<sup>1</sup> In his study of Western culture's figurations and conceptions of "frailty," Jean-Louis Chrétien notes that the currently much used term "vulnerability" refers to the disposition of being injured by external causes, while frailty also refers to causes of breaking that are inherent to the frail object or person.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler is quoting Emmanuel Levinas, "Peace and Proximity," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler is quoting from Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1986, pp. 23-24.

Referring to manipulating media images, Butler uses Levinas's notion of the face to probe the difference between dehumanizing representations that mask our proximity to the other's precariousness and those that humanize. For Butler, a human representation should remind us of our frailty and involve us in the other's suffering. It should address us and, at the same time, reflect the opacity of the other, a mystery that does not necessarily point towards religious transcendence. A humanizing representation speaks to us all the more profoundly when we are unable to explain exactly why it speaks to us or what it says. At a time when the humanities was said to have lost its moral authority "with all their relativism and questioning and 'critique'" (129), its present task, Butler claims, must be to rehumanize our representations of the other:

If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is in no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense. ("Precarious Life" 151)

In spite of humanistic gerontology's efforts to nuance the stereotypes of old age, the taboo of aging persists in our societies. "Are old people human?" asked Simone de Beauvoir on the cover of *La Vieillesse* (1970). "À voir la manière dont notre société les traite, il est permis d'en douter" [*Considering how our society treats them, one has reason to doubt it*] (Beauvoir, Cover copy). Her question has renewed currency in the COVID-19 crisis, as does the tendency to identify older individuals with dehumanizing group characteristics. Equally dehumanizing are the stereotypical images we have all seen that personify successful aging.<sup>4</sup> Those photos of happy, fit, and dynamic elders definitely lack something that is present in Maggi Hambling's *Self Portrait* on the front of our edited volume. Hers is an ambivalent face that speaks to us about loss, suffering, and determination, but mostly about something inaccessible that concerns us. What

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Gilleard's essay, "Suffering: The Darker Side of Ageing", is a timely critique of the general tendency of gerontology and age studies to focus on external causes of misery and lack of success in old age at the detriment of suffering as a philosophical problem and part of human condition. [\*Journal of Aging Studies\*, vol 44](#), March 2018, pp. 28-33.

is going on in her embodied mind? The left half of her face is dissolving, black paint trickling from her shoulder, the left eye is in darkness but the right eye looks firmly at us and inward at the same time. Here is human vanishing and emergence, knowing and not knowing how to feel. Much more could be said about this *Self Portrait*; the point here is that, if the humanities' task is to represent the irrepresentable human, this task should be especially meaningful for students of literature and aging. Our edited volume reflects on a variety of first-person perspectives on collective realities, but none are exhaustive. Searching the human beyond the statistical data and the cultural stereotypes, returning to us the *stillhuman* at the limits of language and communication, are efforts doomed to fail but which must be constantly sustained: "endless stories of endless endings" may be exactly what we need to rehumanize the innumerable faces of aging.

#### **PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION**

One can easily imagine other selection criteria for other versions of an edited volume entitled *Literature and Ageing*. A narrower focus would have been ensured by prioritizing a certain period or genre, a chosen ancillary discipline or sub-topic of aging. Our collection of eight essays is limited to Anglophone literary writing from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, but open to explore how any work from this period represents and critiques the various parallel stories of age. Literary writing includes in this context not only novels, plays, and poems but also philosophical texts, essays, autobiographical writing, and self-help literature. Some authors also draw on cinematic material. We did not want to reduce our potential readership to a special interest group or to literary age scholars. Given the limitations of the format, it was important for us to demonstrate openness to a topic that should be of social concern to most people and in which all those who hope for a long life are implicated. It seemed equally important to avoid identifying with one particular literary or gerontological trend or using literature as a tool for a predefined political cause. Our aim as editors was to give samples of what new and original literary studies of aging can be, testifying to the growing interest in the topic among readers

and scholars of all orientations and the rising wave of age-related novels and films.

### **IDENTITIES AND FIGURES OF AGING**

In the same way as modern gerontology is essentially interdisciplinary, acknowledging that old age is too complex a phenomenon to be dealt with by one discipline alone, age as a cultural category of identity is approached at the intersections of gender, race, class, and disability. This collection holds it as an advantage, then, that literary studies does not simply displace other approaches but by its nature (and its history) accommodates and appropriates them. This collection wants to put age into conversation with the complexities of selfhood and social belonging entailed in gender identity, race politics, and our uneven vulnerability to environmental change, just as it wants to think about more longstanding concerns of literary scholarship, such as genre, poetics, and narrative form. Indeed, these two ‘levels’ of concern are closely implicated in one another, just as the identities in question are interrelated. Rather than concentrating on better defining older age *per se* in characterizing its specificity, as Chris Gilleard’s review seems – reasonably enough – to expect, we hold that we can seek to know it only insofar as it is mutually determined by these other identities and conditions.

This is not a contentious position: the recent series on *Ageing in a Global Context* from Policy Press in the UK reflects just these experiences of intersectional aging. The closing keynote of the NANAS/ENAS Conference on Cultural Gerontology in 2014, by Harry Moody, was already an environmentalist call to arms—a call which finds a response in the critique of “temporal parochialism” made in Kathleen Woodward’s pathbreaking essay about ageing, climate change, and the Anthropocene here. The new wave of literature and age studies which this collection aims to represent resists parochialism of every kind in reflecting the current expansive work of the field.

Offering a critical understanding of the way ethics and aesthetics are related (Falcus and Sako) both in literary and sociocultural narratives, the collection seeks to go beyond the instrumental use of literature as transparent illustration

of the concepts of age studies. It does not want simply to model itself on critical race and gender studies, important forbears that the founder of the field (and collection author) Margaret Morganroth Gullette has identified for age studies (Gullette 1993), but to work in tandem with these endeavors to broaden and make more representative a discipline that has hitherto focused on white European and North American culture, and to harness the generative nature of queer theoretical ideas (as Falcus, Timms, and Woodward do in this collection).

The two essays investigating age through the lens of colonial and post-colonial studies, by Jewusiak and Timms respectively, are not only accomplished literary readings but also show how symbolic imaginaries of age have been harnessed at moments of key political upheaval – domination or liberation – and historical change. They identify ways in which age is used, positively and negatively, by political ideology, but also how older people can speak back to and resist such manipulation in fiction and in life.

It seems to us a false distinction—as Gilleard has himself shown us in his groundbreaking work with Paul Higgs on the cultural imaginary (Gilleard and Higgs 2013) – to separate the symbolic values that age *has* (and which literary studies can draw out) from what age *is*. So much of the social perception of age is mediated by symbol and stereotype, and the collection scrutinizes novel and disruptive uses of tropes of older age – the idea of second childhood, the grotesque older woman, the idealized grandparent – as well as new figures emerging around the parent with dementia or aging babyboomer. At the present moment, in the face of age discourses connected to pandemic and national protectionism, the laying bare of age stereotypes as rhetorical trope and political strategy is of particular and vital interest.

To counter such rhetoric, literary treatments of age offer a multi-faceted view not only of what we are, but also of what we do. This collection thinks about age in relation to our actions and identities as agents: in relation to work (the contributions of Woodward, Barry, and Amigoni), in relation to political action and activism (Jewusiak, Timms), in relation to reproduction (Falcus), and in relation to the serious business of play (Valeur).

## GENRES OF AGING

The collection also pays consistent attention to genre as not only a descriptive but also a critical lens through which to view age. Helen Small thinks about the productive tension of the genre of detective fiction and the persistent unknowns of older age. Often, dementia is a common and expedient device in detective fiction, affording the occasion for both concealment and revelation. Alice LaPlante challenges the reader's expectations in this respect – in Small's account – and allows for a more philosophical consideration of what can be known – and must remain unknown – about an individual's future in older age. Sarah Falcus uses the genre of speculative fiction to look at the way in which a collective sense of the future is also denied to older people in cultural discourse that focuses on the social and political capital of children (the reproductive futurism that also motivates the young black activists in Timms's account). Where intergenerational hierarchies are upended by environmental catastrophe in the novels Falcus discusses, the older generation resume an important role.<sup>5</sup> David Amigoni turns his attention to the genre of self-help and the issue of older age as a central crux of early self-help treatises such as the work of Samuel Smiles. This is in turn a productive framing for his reading of the recent memoir by Wendy Mitchell, living with dementia but defining herself by what she can do (and can learn to do) rather than what she cannot. Peter Svare Valeur in his essay on Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* challenges the conventional understanding of the theatre of the absurd in showing the potential for moments of happiness in the midst of misery and the way in which it too might model an open attitude towards the future through another form of self-help: the medium of play. Finally, even the capacious genre of realism itself comes under scrutiny in Liz Barry's essay, where the canonical plots of ambition and love collide and undo each other – but yet also revive themselves in a new form – under the narrative pressure of a dementia diagnosis.

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<sup>5</sup> There is an interesting parallel here with the current pandemic, in which older people have – against all media reporting – been shown to have better coping strategies than the younger generations (see Ost Mor, Palgi, and Segel-Karpas 2020; Vahia, Jeste, and Reynolds 2020; Luchetti *et al.* 2020).

What age studies might gain from literary studies in these expert hands is a particular critical edge: both an undertaking to examine its own methods, and the narratives and generic expectations that shape its accounts of aging, and an opportunity, in attending to language, genre and symbol, to offer age-sensitive critiques of foundational social practices and attitudes. In this way, it may indeed lay bare how society is “changing itself,” as Gilleard hopes, or indeed how it is failing to change. We also see modelled attitudes and approaches to the future (even future terminations) at both individual and societal level in which age and older people play a crucial part. And, as such, we hope that this collection shows what literature can do, on its own terms, to help us think critically, imaginatively, soberly – and, yes, optimistically (a charge the review lays almost accusingly at its door) about what it is to age and to age towards both the immediate and more distant future.

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