



Foreword

Gry Ulstein

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.
(120-25; ellipses in original)

Little creases under the eyes, furrows beside the mouth that do not go away after laughing, lines that betray those first, subtle signs of youth beginning to leave a human body. Or, as T.S. Eliot reminds us above in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: signs that trigger social expectations of behaviour as the passing of time is suddenly written on our faces. Eliot’s poem is often interpreted as the lyrical persona’s pitiful,





Gry Ulstein

narcissistic rendition of his frustration at not having lived a fulfilling life before “growing old”—finding himself “formulated, sprawling on a pin” (57) under the condemning gaze of a rapidly changing society. Eliot wrote Prufrock’s bitter love song in 1920, nearly a century ago, but it should come as no surprise that the insecurity, frustration, and vulnerability expressed by Mr. Prufrock still—perhaps as much as ever—mark discussions about ageing.

In a 2014 review of Lynne Segal’s *Out of Time*, the (then) 66-year-old writer Jenny Diski humorously points out that “[o]ne of the problems of ageing is knowing when to start complaining about being old” (17).^{1,2} Diski’s essayistic review reveals her frustration at being “treated her age” and condescended to—simply because her body shows physical indicators that generate certain age-biased reactions. Moreover, Diski voices an issue often raised in relation to the current generation of ageing people, the baby boomers:

Those few of our parents, aunts and uncles who remain still disapprove of us. The young now disapprove of us too. Even some of our own demographic disapprove of us. [...] We are the baby boomers, the demographic catastrophe waiting to happen that is now happening. (18)

Ageing has become a larger social issue than ever, as the proportion of people over sixty years old is growing faster than any other age group in most cultures (United Nations 2). Longer life expectancy and declining birth rates—compared to the time of the baby boomers, who are now approaching or over sixty—have led to an ageing population that in the twenty-first century is predicted to set in motion great economic and social shifts. Governments must invent new models for how to deal with employment, healthcare, and infrastructure for this growing demographic without creating an imbalance in the distribution of public services.

1. Diski has since passed away (in 2016).

2. See Segal, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing*, Verso Books, 2013.



Parallel to the increasing average age of the global population runs the eternal desire to postpone the ageing of body and mind for as long as possible. The capitalist machine has moreover turned the process of ageing into multi-billion business opportunities, and the target audience is typically a lot younger than sixty. Searching for “ageing” online mainly churns out cures against it: anti-wrinkle creams, life-altering supplements, plastic surgery, meditation, brain-training, hormone replacement therapy—all to hide the effect time has on the human body. Those inevitable physical “ageing lines,” and all the expectations and prejudices they bring with them, are reflected in lines upon lines of literary texts that grapple with this temporal category of life. As the present issue of *Frame* will demonstrate, moreover, the explicit *study* of these texts has only relatively recently gained support within (comparative) literary research.

Frame 30.1 investigates to what extent our perception of ageing is tied to societal anticipations and economic, political, or cultural constructs. Stories about ageing can be an invaluable cultural resource to foster understanding of and appreciation for the experience of growing old, and the topic is therefore interesting when considering issues of identity and social normativity. On the other hand, the discourse around ageing can also be criticised for not being nuanced due to stereotypes and myths that are left unmentioned or that are addressed in unconstructive ways. How do literary accounts of ageing vary in their display of the ageing process within different contexts? Could ageing be defined by other denominators than merely the passing of time?

In *Frame*’s special preface “Old Age is Not a Modern Invention,” historian Lynn Botelho debunks myths about old age in contemporary society. She argues that historically, the collective (“Western”) view of the old has not changed as much as we might think when comparing early modern times with postmodern times. Although technological developments, capitalism, urbanisation, globalisation, and other accelerating processes have altered the lives of elderly people drastically, the narratives of old age that persist might benefit from a historical perspective.

Aagje Swinnen, Cynthia Port, and Valerie Barnes Lipscomb offer a report on the roundtable on ageing studies during the MLA 2017



Gry Ulstein

conference in Philadelphia, mapping the development of this underdog within literary and cultural research. Their text gives an introduction to the evolution of ageing studies in general, as well as a cartography of the work currently being done. It further reveals how the field has moved from a position of not being taken seriously by literary scholars, to having established international research communities and organisations—currently in the process of growing ever more diverse approaches from all areas of the humanities.

While Swinnen, Port, and Barnes Lipscomb's report displays the reinforced view on ageing as a valid field of analysis within literary studies, Rudolph Glitz next points out an inauspicious tendency within ageing studies that he argues ought to get more, and more nuanced, critical attention. "Ageing and Identity as a Problem for Social Justice" throws a sharp, interdisciplinary gaze at the problem that arises when social justice critics treat age(ing) as an identity category analogous to gender and race. Using John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness to illustrate how difficult it is to apply social justice critique to a temporally unstable category such as ageing, Glitz suggests that a more productive alternative would be to "change one's rhetorical framework, namely away from conceptions of justice and towards something one might call life-course engineering or planning."

Continuing on quite a different note than Glitz, Marta Miquel-Baldellou's "Disrupting Dictates of Gender and Ageing through Creativity: Daphne du Maurier's Writing Persona in *The Breaking Point*" argues that du Maurier in her fiction investigates, disrupts, and ultimately frees herself from real-life traditional gender roles and norms of old age. Miquel-Baldellou's paper analyses du Maurier's novel from an autobiographical viewpoint, speculating that the act of writing *The Breaking Point* contributed to helping both du Maurier's main character and du Maurier herself to constructively process and cope with insecurity and pain related to normative issues of gender and ageing. Glitz's and Miquel-Baldellou's papers present two different takes on identity politics and ageing: Miquel-Baldellou in fact performing the very equation of age with identity categories like gender and race that Glitz questions.

Gregory Stephens, with a background as teacher of Creative Writing, continues Miquel-Baldellou's autobiographical outlook in his paper on



the role of (aged) fatherhood in J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*—though his position is less political and more explicitly personal than Baldellou's. In his analysis of Coetzee's semi-autobiographical work, Stephens mirrors the tragedy of his own experiences with “losing a son” to that of Coetzee, speculating how this loss might have affected Coetzee's—as well as Stephens's own—writing. The three-tier mirroring of Coetzee's storyworld, Coetzee's real life, and Stephens's personal experiences makes this paper an unorthodox, and striking contribution to the discussion of ageing in relation to fatherhood.

In our Masterclass section, Sophie Van den Elzen's paper iterates Miquel-Baldellou's and Stephens's focus on autobiography. Van den Elzen, however, uses the genre to take an important look at disintegrating, sick bodies (and minds) and shows how issues of ageing are often reflected in issues of illness and disease. Van den Elzen's analysis of Hervé Guibert's autobiographical study of his own diagnosis and further life with—and inevitable death by—AIDS lays bare the heavy normativity that typically guides the publishing of (“monumental”) autobiographies. Van den Elzen argues that Guibert challenges said norms by the “haunting quality” of his texts; that Guibert's work creates an alternative, discursive subjectivity which allows him to enter, and experiment with, the exclusionary literary genre of autobiography.

The present issue marks *Frame*'s thirtieth anniversary and sixtieth publication. Turning thirty years of age is still seen as a milestone in many cultures, as the number typically implies an expectation of stable employment, family formation, and economic growth: a general sense of settlement. Most thirty-year-olds I know, however, might laugh at this statement (a trace of panic in their voices perhaps), as they feel that the social and economic stability expected of them is still far away. The experience of ageing as a precarious process is, as Botelho reminds us in her preface, not a new feeling—nor is it limited to people over sixty. More than those defined as elderly will recognise themselves in T. S. Eliot's poem about a man who fears his own ridicule at the sandy hands of time. Jenny Diski echoes Mr. Prufrock in her essay, but seems to take it upon herself to speak for *all* people of age in the twenty-first century when she bitterly states that “being old and having been young, we are



Gry Ulstein

very well aware of the world's capacity to remain utterly unchanged by our efforts" (Diski 20). Perhaps *Frame* 30.1 can be seen as an effort to collect voices—"young" and "old"—that treat the topic of ageing as an opportunity for intergenerational dialogue and encourage a discourse that values ideas over age.

Works cited

Diski, Jenny. "However I smell." *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 9, 8. May 2014, lrb.co.uk.

Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Prufrock and Other Observations*, A. A. Knopf, 1920, *Bartleby*, 2011, bartleby.com.

Segal, Lynn. *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing*, Verso Books, 2013.

United Nations. "World Population Ageing 2015." Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, United Nations, 2015, un.org.