

Literary Gerontology Comes of Age: *A Poetic Language of Ageing* (2023), edited by Olga V. Lehmann and Oddgeir Synnes

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“[M]aybe one has to be ‘demented’ to write good poems,” the established Dutch poet Leo Herberghs opines in an interview with Aagje Swinnen in a chapter of *A Poetic Language of Ageing* (2023, 28). While this evocative (and facetious) statement was intended as metaphoric, Herberghs, aged 91 and suffering from dementia at the time of the interview, produced poems he considered “shorter and more impression-like in his later years”, despite also insisting that “[age] does not play a part in poetry” (2023, 27–28). Swinnen goes on to argue that despite poetry being regarded as “the most semantically dense and difficult literary genre, ... perhaps counterintuitively, the aesthetic and pragmatic affordances of poetry enable people who live with dementia to express themselves” (Swinnen 2023, 28). However, dementia, and concurrently forgetfulness, is traditionally associated with the loss of words and the loss of self, while poetry, and lyric poetry especially, concerns itself with the construction of the self through words. While poetry may require a certain degree of stripping away of the self, it also necessitates sufficient cognitive functionality to find appropriate words that convey this experience. This tension between words, memory, the ageing self and poetry is what editors Olga V. Lehmann and Oddgeir Synnes attempt to explore in this collection of essays.

As the world’s population continues to age at an unprecedented rate (WHO 2022), the field of social gerontology has struggled to keep pace with the myriad ways in which the process of ageing (and the ageing individual) can be understood, analysed and theorised. While ageing may be a universal reality, each individual’s experience of senescence differs vastly. Furthermore, because the elderly comprise a vulnerable group, academic studies that focus on aspects relating to elderly care, abuse of the



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elderly, and medical and psychological developments relating to “healthy ageing” have dominated the field of gerontology. Social gerontology, and later literary gerontology, emerged in an attempt to put the voice of the ageing individual at the centre of the research project. As with all analytic frameworks seeking to redress a lack of scholarly attention, literary gerontology underwent the usual (but necessary) growing pains that necessitated research that uncovers the lack of representation of the elderly in critical readings of texts, that bring to light negative or stereotypical representations of ageing in literary texts, and that focused on works that showcase narratives of ageing marginalised by geopolitics, gender, sexuality amongst others. Most studies of this kind favoured prose fiction such as novels and short stories. Gregory Orr (2023, xii), in his Foreword to this collection, ascribes the lack of focus on the poetic genre in literary gerontology to lyric poetry being associated with the passions of youth.

A Poetic Language of Ageing (Orr 2023) is a text that evidences unequivocally that literary gerontology as a discipline has come of age. The aim of the collection, the editors attest, is to position poetry as “an important yet underdeveloped genre for giving voice to the experiences and complexities of later life” (Orr 2023, 3). They argue that the process of ageing involves a great degree of emotional, physical and psychological disorder, and that lyric poetry can provide what Robert Frost (1943, v) describes as “a momentary stay against the confusion of the world.” Instead of “excluding disorder”, Orr (2023, vii) argues that lyric poetry incorporates disorder “into the poem itself so that order and disorder exist in a dynamic tension, and both are recognized as forces in human life.” While many of the essays in the collection do involve a degree of the sociological approach that has characterised literary gerontology up until this point, the theorisation of the formal aspects of poetry and how this manifests in varying contexts of ageing remains central.

This is the collection’s greatest strength—it does not present the ageing individual or the ageing poetic voice as an object of study. Instead, it positions the unique intricacies of the experience of ageing as a lens that may present new ways of thinking about the formal aspects of poetry as a genre, making this a text that has value far beyond what it presents to the growth of literary gerontology. At the same time, it retains at heart the impulse that has fuelled most of the branches of gerontological research: a recognition that older age be seen as more than a period of decline or deterioration, and an insistence that ageing individuals be given the opportunity to have their value recognised. *A Poetic Language of Ageing* (Lehmann and Synnes 2023) places poetry as a genre at the centre of this. As Gregory Orr (2003, xiv) writes, “To create a poem or story itself affirms its writer’s individual dignity and identity, but to present that writing to an appropriate and appreciative audience ushers the old author even further out of isolation and back into the human community.”

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