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Book Review

Review of Lehmann, Olga V., and Oddgeir Synnes, eds. *A Poetic Language of Ageing.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2023. pp. 213. Price: $115.00 (Hardcover); $35.95 (eBook).

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A Poetic Language of Ageing is the third element of the Bloomsbury series *Humanities, Ageing and Later Life*. One author, Olga V. Lehmann is a researcher, lecturer, and mental health activist, while the second author, Oddgeir Synnes, is a Professor of Health Humanities, both based in Norway. Their volume explores the beneficial role poetry can play in later life, and how it suits old age's pace and rhythm, especially that of those with dementia. The different contributions come from a variety of authors and fields including literature studies, social sciences, health sciences, and education. They all underline how aging for older adults does not need be a shameful and lonely stage of life. Instead, it contains a reflexive beauty that likens it to poetry, as well as a possibility for communion with others, for instance through the sharing of poetry.

In the introduction, the editors situate the volume within an ongoing effort to develop "lyric gerontology" (3), or a study of aging that explicitly references poetic practices. Gregory Orr, a self-defined "old poet"(xii), embodies these themes in his brief forword, testifying to how poetry has helped him survive as he has kept writing throughout the decades of his life. Following Orr, the contributing authors attest that poetry also goes beyond being a survival tactic for older adults. It can help color and give meaning to the time we have left.

The first contributions touch on one of the collection's recurring motifs: dementia. In the elegant essay "The Mother of Beauty: Notes on the (Possible) Poetry of Dementia," Psychology professor Mark Freeman reveals how the condition transforms his mother from an independent individual to a needy dependent, and highlights her difficulty in adjusting to this shift. Freeman analyses how dementia immediately puts both aging and poetic language to the test, as it undoes the self-aware ego that both presume as their subject, the necessity of coherence. Dementia relies instead on others: the listener and the reader. It provokes the possibility that this ego may be less relevant than researchers thought. The importance of finding dignity without overly relying on this ego is a constant in the collection – as in the poetic genre itself.

In the second chapter, "Poetry and Dementia: Imagining and Shaping More Just Futures," Literary scholar and aging researcher Aagje Swinnen contrasts two experiences of dementia in older age from a social science perspective. One experience is that of acclaimed Dutch poet Leo Herberghs, who rejected the idea that his "I" could be undone by this neurodegenerative condition. He praised Belgian writer Hugo Claus' choice of euthanasia against the unravelling of one's self. The other experience is of an unnamed group engaging in the Alzheimer's Poetry Project, where collective poetry reading brings

people together. Swinnen defends the latter as the more just approach to dementia, one that uses poetry to destabilize "the boundaries between neurotypical and neurodivergent people" (40) and enrichen their lives.

In "Time and Dignity: A Phenomenological Investigation of Poetry Writing in Dementia Care," (Chapter Three) Oddgeir Synnes, along with Professors of Global Public Health and Primary Care at the University of Bergen, Eva Gjengedal and Målfrid Råheim, present a sketch of the poetic style of dementia. They draw from a series of poetry sessions with older adults with dementia that Synnes ran in 2015-2016. They document how in these sessions the linear presumption of lyrical poetry gives way to an "episodic" (44) understanding of life, an emphasis on the present moment, the use of gestures, and more.

The following three chapters take on more introspective and literary perspectives. Professor and researcher of Psychology, Kyoko Murakami's "Growing Older with Haiku: What Haiku Offers to Japanese Expats in Denmark" traces the specific value and strength of haiku practice for older adults through the experiences of two women in Copenhagen. Murakami underlines both haiku practice's emphasis on being in the moment and the importance of sharing that moment's reflections with others. The poet Ana Cecilia de Sousa Bastos' contribution, "Poetry Lasts Forever: Case Study of a 100-year-old Brazilian Poet and His Daughter" concerns her father, Brazilian poet José Newton, and the ways in which his writing and reading and passion for poetry cradle him through the troughs and peaks of his life. Since De Sousa Bastos is an aging poet herself, she adds another personal edge to the essay, giving the reader a more holistic understanding of the poetic substance as life force for them. In his chapter,"'An Old Man Can Do Somewhat': Styles of Male Old Age in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 2*" (Chapter Six), Professor of Sociology Arthur W. Frank provides a surprisingly pleasant piece of literary analysis. The various older men in Shakespeare's masterpiece are outlined and juiced for the insights they can give us into the aging process, drawing both from each man's role in the wider narrative and the lyric specificity of their individual lives.

The next chapter (Chapter Seven), "Virtuous Ageing as a Poetic Endeavour: Motivations to Write and Effects of Writing Among Older Adults in Norway," by Olga V. Lehmann and Psychologist Svend Brinkmann, is key to the wider collection and brings us, perhaps a bit sharply, back into the remit of the social sciences and of policy implications. It recounts a seven-week autobiographical writing course for older adults run by Lehmann in 2019. The framework is that of "virtuous ageing" (117), or the question of how we can move into post-retirement life gracefully and meaningfully, and how the state can help us do so. As the authors demonstrate, writing groups – their intellectual stimulation, exploration of identities, and especially their communal nature – help lend later life a sense of purpose and combat newfound loneliness.

In his chapter, "The Poetics of Growing Old: Metaphoric Competence and the Philosophic Homework of Later Life," Gerontology Professor William L. Randall converts this line of thought into the more colorful and indirect calling of the humanities, placing the onus on us as we age to do so gracefully and courageously. We can achieve this by actively participating in Randall's "philosophic homework" (138), such as developing our "metaphoric competence" (140), by asking transcendent questions, and gazing at past events with ironic detachment.

The following chapters are more disparate. Professor of Political Science Steven R. Brown's chapter, "Poetry, Science, and a Science of Poetry: With an Illustration of Poetry and Ageing" follows a different thread from the preceding essays. He introduces and defends the "Q methodology" (156), of which he is a leading expert. It is a quantitative and systematic method for analyzing the swirling subjectivity of

literature and the arts, in which subjective opinions about a topic are collected and then arranged according to a scale in relation to each other. Brown explains the method in intriguing detail and applies it to a set of poems concerning aging, ultimately drawing from it a specific set of disparate attitudes to the theme of growing old. In her chapter "Writing Lives," autobiographical writer Merete Mazzarella dwells on her writing and that of her older students to see what lessons may be drawn from the practice of writing autobiographically for older individuals. She is refreshingly honest and simple in her assessment of what happens when we look increasingly inward with age, at the positive and negative aspects of (poetic) self-analysis.

The final chapter by literary scholar and medical student Alastair Morrison "Other Voices: George Oppen, Dementia, and the Echo of Lyric" bears the weight of what otherwise may have been lacking in the collection: a conclusion. The author tackles the themes of age, poetry, and dementia, through the words and experiences of 20th century American poet George Oppen. Readers are faced once more with the unravelling of autonomous first-person subjectivity, but also, with the dangers of giving it up completely. Would that not presume an impossibility, that we could ever faithfully channel the voice of any other? And what dignity would that afford, denying an autonomous subject-hood to those in different conditions? Yet, how equally ridiculous to deny the importance of the assistance of others in our self-development, particularly as we age. Morrison leaves us there, uncomfortably dependent on "radical otherness" (196), balancing between "the opposition of solipsism and dissolution [in the other]" (200). All we can do is continuously make attempts, reliant in both our mediations and our results on the imperfections of language and communication, whether we are speaking of, speaking to, speaking for. But here we have come to the crux: poetic language – soft, supple, multi-faceted, non-linear – allows us to navigate this difficulty of being and subjectivity, one that probably deepens with the vulnerability of old age.

To conclude, this collection of essays will doubtless be of interest and use to anyone working in the intersections of aging and the humanities, poetry most specifically. The lack of clear framing beyond that, and the somewhat tepid nature of the introduction, fail to do justice to the rich and varied contributions within the collection. A more developed framework might contextualize them better and put them in dialogue with each other to uncover precisely those qualities of poetic language that make it so well-suited to older age. Moreover, the slight and unacknowledged Nordic bias – down to the (lovely) Hilma af Klint detail on the cover – somewhat belies what feels to be a set of universal takeaways. It is overall a surprisingly engaging and nuanced scholarly work, one that successfully speaks to, as the dedication at the beginning states, "the older generations that inhabit us" (no pagination). Such dialogue would feel, without poetry, a thoroughly impossible task.