

Review Article

CULTURE AND DECLINE: AGE AWARENESS AND LIFE REVIEW

Mike Hepworth*

Margaret Morganroth Gullette. *Aged by Culture*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004. 267 pp., pbk \$18.50, ISBN 0 226 31062 0.

Anita Brookner. *The Next Big Thing*. Viking, London, 2002. 247 pp., hbk £16.99, ISBN 9 780670 913022.

Margaret Drabble. *The Seven Sisters*. Viking, London, 2002. 307 pp., hbk £16.99, ISBN 0 670 91335 0.

Alan Sillitoe. *Birthday*. Flamingo, London, 2002. 249 pp., pbk £6.99, ISBN 0 00 710883 4.

Louis Begley. *About Schmidt*. Serpent's Tail, London, 2003. 274 pp., pbk £8.99, ISBN 1 85242 843 0.

Since the publication of her first book in 1988, Margaret Gullette has been a vigorous exponent of the view that the imaginative novels we read about ageing are an important cultural resource for making sense of the biological processes of growing older. Through the emphasis they choose to give to positive or to negative aspects of ageing and old age, authors can encourage and support the ageist tendencies in western culture, or alternatively can celebrate creativity and renewal in later life and, in so doing, make a potentially age-liberating contribution to the diminishment of prejudice against older people.

Her latest book, *Aged by Culture*, follows seamlessly from her previous major books in its engagement with the endemic tendency in western culture to see the essential 'truth' of ageing as a period of personal, social and biological decline into death (Gullette 1988, 1997). Although this truth is ostensibly biomedical, its origin should not be traced back to the physical science of ageing but to a tendency in western culture (including fiction, film, theatre and journalism) to interpret the various bodily changes that accompany chronological ageing as signs of a falling away from the ideal conditions of youth. Interpreted in this way, middle age or, to use the more contemporary description 'midlife', becomes the point at which decline is perceived to begin; it is therefore hardly surprising that people are becoming increasingly conscious of midlife as a problematic lifecourse stage,

* Department of Sociology, University of Aberdeen, UK.

one characterised by increased anxiety over the prospect of diminishing looks, skills and social significance. In this sense, ageism has made it possible for society to invent the ‘midlife crisis’, because it only makes sense when later life is regarded as a period of loss and reduced life chances. And the key question at the heart of *Aged by Culture* is: why is it so hard for all of us to resist the master narrative of decline?

Gullette’s sociologically informed analysis finds that the representation of decline is as an ‘age-ideology’, a kind of master narrative that is a persistent theme in many cultural products, including imaginative and gerontological writing. In her view, ‘decline’ is a dominant ideology in the Marxist sense of producing alienation from the reality of ageing, and it should be conceptualised as a construct. The dominant decline ideology shapes the European-American lifecourse in several pernicious ways, not least in encouraging older people to look for negative signs of ageing in their body rather than in their social context. As we grow older, she argues, we become more and more concerned with various body parts rather than with the cultural meanings assigned to those parts. The paradoxical result is that we internalise decline at the same time as we also look for positive aspects of ageing. Decline and progressive attitudes towards growing older are thus in a precarious state of cultural balance – and decline is at present winning.

We should look less to the parts of our bodies and more towards the prevailing ideas and beliefs about ageing for the source of our personal and social problems with growing older. The belief in decline is associated with negative age-stereotypes and the stigmatisation of ageing and old age. This is because the use of the concept ‘decline’ has a collectivising effect: the ‘singular body-mind which each of us experiences as unique becomes ‘just one among others’ (2004: 133). We blame the body for letting us down rather than the social forces that ‘structure feelings of decline and that link “age” to the body in knotted chains of signifiers’ (2004: 133).

Much of Gullette’s analytical scholarship has been devoted to providing evidence of the pervasive presence of decline in fictional narratives of ageing and old age as written from the mid-19th century to the present day. She shows that our subjective experiences of ageing and negative attitudes towards older people are shaped by ‘stories of ageing’ that derive from the interplay between fictional and non-fictional accounts, as in novels, journalism and gerontology. Her first intention is to show both that old age is not a fixed bodily state but the product of an array of cultural accounts, and that this information is organised in prospective age narratives of a mainly undesired future at one’s older ages. Having alerted us to the pervasive nature of ageism, and so as not to leave readers in a pessimistic limbo, her second intention is to demonstrate that the conventional narrative of ‘time passing means inevitable decline’ is not the only story to be told about the experience of growing older. There are, she argues, many other possible story forms. Decline may be deeply entrenched in common experience but there is considerable scope for an alternative ‘progress narrative’, which can be built from ‘stories in which the implicit meanings of ageing run from survival, resilience, recovery and development, all the way up to collective resistance to decline forces’ (2004: 17). In contrast to decline novels, those with progressive accounts

are ‘recovery novels’: they resist decline narratives and open up more positive and nuanced visions of later life.

Literary gerontologists have for some time been engaged with the creative contributions that novelists and poets can and do make to the enhancement of the experience of ageing (Hepworth 2000). In *Aged by Culture*, Gullette’s distinctive contribution is sharpened by the attention she pays to the hard facts about income differentials and the economic hardships of early retirement and redundancy, with particular reference to the United States. The book blends literary criticism with a critique of the political economy of ageing, and shows that ageist tendencies in the former echo the structural explanations of the latter.

Her response is to argue for a ‘nuanced and precautionary’ optimism that recognises the harsh realities and represents the lifecourse as a positive experience for some and a negative experience for others (2004: 28). To Gullette, ‘ageing as decline’ is a hydra-headed cultural phenomenon formed from a structured web of ideological affinities between economic difficulties, like midlife redundancy and early retirement, and failed personal relationships, anxiety, fear and conflict. The seeds of decline become evident in midlife, when the economic rewards that underpin many people’s positive self-evaluations begin to appear insecure or are diminished, and it becomes difficult to maintain a progressive narrative of personal ageing. Decline and pessimism are intertwined in fiction and in life, and there are direct causal and temporal relationships with the decline in material life chances.

Economic factors pervade the four novels reviewed in this article, and close examination of their treatment serves to elaborate Gullette’s analysis. In Louis Begley’s highly popular novel, *About Schmidt*, the main character, who is comfortably-off and therefore has time and money to concentrate mental energy on his life experience, is extremely disconcerted when his former employer sounds him out about reducing his pension. In Margaret Drabble’s *The Seven Sisters*, the main character receives an unexpected inheritance which relieves her straitened circumstances and considerably enhances her journey of self discovery. In Alan Sillitoe’s *Birthday*, the main character is free to explore his later life and the quality of his relationships, past, present and future, because he is financially secure; and in *The Next Big Thing*, Anita Brookner’s main character has no pressing financial difficulties. All are thus economically free to engage with the fact that they are growing older and to explore the vicissitudes of the ageing process.

Freedom from financial constraint undoubtedly allows much more scope for a progressive life review. *Aged by Culture* opens with an account of children looking around a *Secrets of Ageing* exhibition at the Boston Museum of Science. One exhibit draws Gullette’s particular attention, ‘Face Ageing’, which is open only to children aged less than 15 years. The children were invited to manipulate a digitalised reproduction of their faces that aged the image to that supposed at 69 years. She reports that most of the children were ‘shaken’ by what they saw. The children were invited to project themselves into the future, inscribed as the passage of years on the face, and this was immediately rejected as undesirable. The best life is a young life; the best self is a young self. Coming to terms with life from the middle years onwards therefore involves coming to terms with the high evaluation placed on the youthful self. Alternative narratives of ageing

which set out to open up the possibility of progress must look for new ways of coming to terms with the interplay between past, present and future in diverse personal life reviews.

Turning to the four novels, I relate them to Gullette's critique and consider the way in which each author, working with very different characters, events, incidents and geographical locations, handles the effects of time passing on an older person's self-conception. All narrative fiction 'tells us what it is like to become "older", if only a day or a few hours older', but the task of the writer is also to decide whether 'the protagonist is better or worse off' as a result of this process (Gullette 1988: 30). In the fiction of decline, the main character ends up being worse off (sometimes tragically, as in *King Lear*), whereas at the close of a progressive narrative the main character finds him or herself in an improved or more hopeful situation than may have initially imagined. As far as fiction is concerned, it is important to note that Gullette has stressed that although progress novels 'plump for "better"' (1988: 30), this does not mean that the losses and negative features of ageing are ignored or minimised. For many, the experience of ageing as a process of personal and social decline is closely and ambiguously interwoven with a transition to a more satisfactory personal sense of selfhood and reconciliation in late life. How then do these four novelists in their stories of ageing handle the balance between decline and progress that is so crucial to Gullette?

For the central character in Brookner's novel, Herz, ageing is a kind of performance, an exercise in self-presentation where he, as an older person, believes he has to guard against presenting the appearance of decline. Herz's presentation of his self of course engages with the decline narrative and, specifically, the widespread view that age-related changes in external appearance indicate a pervasive state of personal decline. But it would be wrong to regard this novel as an unrelieved story of total decline: Herz's consciousness of his aged appearance masks an inner subjective struggle that involves an intensive and deeply emotional life review. Brookner enables the reader to access the complex subjective existence of her character and his efforts to challenge his personal belief that growing older means that life is coming to an end and that nothing much more will happen.

Like Jenny in Sillitoe's novel, Herz has in certain respects spent his life in dutiful obedience to others. Growing older, he realises, has brought him a kind of freedom, but he still doesn't know how to use it, and his lifetime habit of escaping from dull reality into memory is hard to relinquish. Herz also realises that he can't return to the past and any attempt to do so would be self-deluding. The decision he makes towards the end of the novel to meet up again with his cousin Fanny, with whom he was in love when young and whose image as a young woman had not faded from his memory, does not deceive him into thinking that she will not have been changed by age or that he could recapture the love of his lost youth.

For Herz, who sees himself as a survivor, dreaming brings back the younger self that he feels he has surrendered to time. And although he has spent much of his life trapped in memory, his ability as an older man to evaluate his past experience does open his mind, at least his imagination, to the possibility of renewal or progress in later life. But he is also painfully aware that he is a prisoner of his own history and that it will be for future generations to live out his dream of a more liberated old age.

In Margaret Drabble's novel, Candida Wilton is more successful in freeing herself from the past and in taking personal control of her later life. Aged 60 years, she had been a headmaster's wife and was now divorced from Andrew who had begun an affair with another woman. She had moved away from a rural area where they lived into a tiny flat in London, and is attempting to create a completely new life for herself, but with the twin burdens of limited material resources and low self-confidence. In terms of the structure of the narrative and the explicit theme of life as a journey, the story comes closest to Gullette's conception of the midlife progress novel. *The Seven Sisters* has four parts that follow Candida's progress. Part 1, 'Her Diary', concentrates on Candida's descriptions of her mundane and undramatic efforts to make a new life for herself and to come to terms with her changed situation and herself. Like Herz, Candida describes herself as a person to whom nothing ever happens although, unlike him, she is always expecting something exciting and life transforming. The novel begins, therefore, with Candida as an invisible older woman – unobtrusive and self-effacing – but she is made of sterner stuff than Herz and makes an effort to enjoy completely new experiences.

Change in her case is not confined, as with Herz, to an internal mental review of possible pleasures, but encompasses an alternative lifestyle in later life, and she is inspired by her participation in a class on the classical poet Virgil to invite fellow class members and a couple of old friends – the *Seven Sisters* – on an Italian journey to look for the 'real' sites of scenes from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Bearing in mind Gullette's strictures on the importance of economic support for the realisation of a progress narrative, Candida's bold venture is made possible by an unexpected windfall of £120,000. Candida is transformed through this journey (the second part of the novel) from a woman who sees herself, and is seen by her companions, as a self-deprecating divorcee of slender means into a much more positive and attractive character.

Her friend Julia recognises this transformation when they discuss ageing in a hotel in Tunis on the first stage of their journey. Candida says that she now feels much more positive about growing older; in fact, she says, she hasn't felt so cheerful for years. She sees herself as 'freed from her own whining monologue ... aware that she has turned into another person, a multiple, polyphonic person, who need not pretend to be stupid, who can use long words or make classical allusions if she wishes, without fear of being called a pedant or a swat or a semi-educated fool or somebody trying to be too-clever-by-half' (2002: 172). She has been liberated from her role as victim; one she sees as having played throughout her married life with her husband and now grown-up children. For Candida, the journey is profoundly symbolic, as indicated by her absorption in Virgil's *Aeneid* and the quest for the 'real' Carthage, culminating at the site of the cave of the Sybil of Cumae. The practical effort involved in setting up the trip, juggling the competing friendships of the group and the disparate individuals who comprise it, stimulate in her a new and positive self-consciousness. For Candida, the change is not in the external structure of society but in her own conception of herself. She does not so much discover a new self but rather enhances her previous self. On first sight of the hotel in Tunis, their point of departure for Naples, she experiences a positive sense of change.

Gullette draws attention to the important distinction between looking back and looking forward when constructing progressive narratives of ageing. It is, of course, what the protagonist does with the future and the effort to reassess the experience of ageing which counts in the progress narrative of later life. As these four novels show, the struggle with the conventions of decline and the efforts to create progressive stories of ageing is a complex engagement with ambiguous cultural resources. Sillitoe's *Birthday* is the sequel to his first and celebrated novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1974, first published 1958). It celebrates the strengths of British working-class life in the traditional mould: loyalty to family through good times and bad, and husbands and wives sticking together when things get tough. Brian Seaton, the central character, when aged 70 years travels back to the working-class area of Nottingham where he grew up to attend the eponymous birthday party. He has become a successful writer and lives alone in London. 'A glimpse of old places set him reviewing the course of his life, though he didn't like doing so, there being so much to anger and shame him. Such recollections should have been pushed out of harm's way by now but weren't' (2002: 53). The account of Brian's personal life review is permeated with his memories of Nottingham as it was and of his perceptions of the changes that have taken place in the people he knows and in the physical and social environment. He is constantly visited with memories of his earlier life and with thoughts about the transition he made to London and a successful writing career, which contrasts with his brother Arthur's life, grounded in Nottingham and surrounded by family and friends who have also stayed in the same place.

The party is for Jenny on her 70th birthday. She was Brian's first teenage love and he wonders whether his life would have been different if he had stayed in Nottingham and he and Jenny had married as many had expected. Perhaps seeing her again after all those years was a sign of 'a future to look forward to' when 'all might yet be well' (2002: 81). Because Jenny is now widowed and Brian is divorced, Derek and his wife Eileen imagine the possibility of a rekindling of the old love. For beneath the volatile surface of Brian's apparent disengagement from his past lies a deeply emotional identification with the Nottingham that he associates with his family and their shared past. And yet Brian, at 70 years of age, still doesn't know what he wants, except that he remains keenly aware that he can't stay in Nottingham. Almost at the end of the book, he takes Jenny to Matlock, which they used to visit on cycle rides when they were young. During the journey, Brian becomes even more aware that the past cannot be recaptured; Sillitoe avoids the trap of nostalgia that Gullette regards as characteristic of a decline narrative. It is possible for Brian and Jenny to meet with affection, though their future as older people cannot be a reclaimed vision of the past. The positive note in *Birthday* is survival in later life: the realisation that though the calendar marks the passing of time and records birthdays, one is still alive and kicking.

The central character in Begley's novel, *About Schmidt*, inhabits a completely different social environment from those described in the three considered above. Albert Schmidt, aged 60 years, has taken early retirement from his position as a senior partner in a New York law firm and he had been professionally and materially successful. When the novel opens, his wife Mary has died and his only daughter, Charlotte, has informed him that she intends to marry her long-term

lover, Jon Riker. Jon, also a lawyer, works in Schmidt's former firm; Schmidt does not really like him but is prepared to pretend. He is described as a man who is proficient at wearing a social mask, a skill he has perfected throughout his professional life. From the first chapter, readers are invited behind the mask and involved in the process of moving in Schmidt's mind from the past to the present and through to the future, as he reflects on his attitude to Charlotte's impending marriage to a man he doesn't like, on the financial arrangements he will make for Charlotte, and on the future of his own relationships. We follow the emergence of Schmidt's character as he attempts to come to terms with the age-related changing social circumstances of his life.

The rejuvenating powers of sexuality are a significant issue in both Begley and Brookner's novels: specifically the sexual attraction of an older man for a younger woman and the implications of age-disparate relations for the ageing process. In *The Next Big Thing*, the physical attraction of Herz to Sophie, a young woman in an adjacent flat, is a two-edged sword. It is positive insofar as it awakens in Herz what he believed to be a lost capacity to feel, and is in this sense potentially liberating, but it is also a reminder of ageing as decline because both he and Sophie consider erotic feelings to be highly inappropriate in an older man. Sophie is disgusted and Herz is ashamed and driven back into his protective shell, reminding us of the tension between progressive and decline narratives when imaginatively constructing the meaning of later life.

Schmidt is rather more fortunate in his sexual adventure, however, and the degree of change in his life is foreshadowed early in the novel when, as a recently bereaved husband, Schmidt reflects frostily on insinuations made to him at a social gathering that, as a rich widower with an attractive and well-appointed home, 'You must be the hottest property around!' (2003: 46). But Schmidt feels he is not ready for such an experience and compiles in his mind a savage catalogue of the decrements of ageing and the unattractiveness of the ageing body including his own. His external appearance is not often described in detail but, as when Brookner's Herz describes his own appearance, and when Drabble's Candida thinks of the effects of ageing on the outward appearance of the body, the words they use are not flattering (by contrast, the main characters in Sillitoe's *Birthday* are described as looking good for their age). Schmidt is disconcerted by his appearance in a mirror in the Harvard Club toilets: 'he looked worse than even the sour person he had glimpsed returning his own stare from a Fifth Avenue store window' (2003: 93).

Schmidt's relationship with a young woman begins in a restaurant where he is served by Carrie, a 24 year-old Puerto Rican waitress to whom he is increasingly attracted. Schmidt's eventual involvement with Carrie develops gradually out of loneliness, as well as sexual desire, because he is a reserved character who finds it difficult to confide in others. He has problems communicating with his daughter and her prospective husband; the loss of his wife does not make things any easier. From Carrie, Schmidt receives endearments he has never had and the remote and cooler aspect of his public presentation of self begins to thaw. There are signs at the end of the novel that he is becoming a fuller human being. Begley therefore engages fully with the decline narrative and in the process develops a progress narrative of ageing that, while not offering a final solution to the problem of

growing older, certainly raises the possibility of positive age-identification: something which Gullette considers to be a crucial constituent of progressive ageing.

In all four novels, the role of sexuality in the construction of positive narratives of ageing is treated as significant and is extensively explored, although with variable evaluations of the progressiveness of this dimension. In Brookner's novel, during a discussion between Herz and his ex-wife Josie, she suggests that men and women are different, in that men seem to continue to look at younger women as if they have something to offer. Women, she says, reach a time when they no longer want to make the effort. Herz's feelings of sexual desire, though long dormant, are awakened by his encounter with Sophie Clay, a financial adviser who moves into the flat beneath him. But he has to struggle with these feelings because he considers it inappropriate for an older man to desire a young woman. It is her youth as much as the fact that she is a woman that beguiles him. His outward appearance as a nondescript older man is at odds with an inner emotional turmoil that he imagines he shares with many other older people. The fact that he can once again enjoy sexual desire is arguably a progressive emotion, in contrast to the negative emotions about his decline into respectable old age. Although Herz was tempted to abandon the dignity of the appearance of old age as decorous decline, he recognised the ambiguity of his feelings. The irony of his situation was that the tables had been turned; it was not the young but the old who must conceal their emotions and monitor their behaviour to conceal desire.

The older person must, to borrow from Elias (1985), continue to act in a civilised manner and comport themselves in stereotypical style: the downside is that good manners have inhibited both men and women. Gullette's decline model of ageing is therefore by no means totally subverted, at least as far as Herz's generation is concerned. Both the experience and the public face of ageing and old age might be different in the future, however, and Herz speculates that the generations to come will not have 'encumbered themselves with outworn methods or procedures [and will have] remained free' (2002: 137). In other words, they may not have the encumbrance of old-fashioned expectations of the behaviour appropriate for older people. There are signs here of a possible cultural transition from decline to progress narratives of experienced ageing.

The possibility of narrative progress raises again the question of the relationships between experienced and imagined ageing and the important broader question of how much personal ageing can be changed. Although fully aware of the deeply entrenched position of decline in western culture and the need for constant vigilance, Gullette's analysis is essentially optimistic. The battle against ageism has only just begun.

In Sillitoe's novel, the positive theme is survival – to carry on being 'alive and kicking' come what may. For Brookner's Herz, any possibility of future change is sealed in a dream rooted in his essential conservatism and timidity. The dream of new experience in later life, when everything seemed to have been signed, sealed and delivered, is gradually realised for Begley's Schmidt in a relationship with a younger woman which promises more than sexual satisfaction. For Drabble's Candida, the ability to make a significant change as one grows older is closely linked to the prospect of finding a new language or form of words with which to

express her changing sense of self and its potential; a language informed in *The Seven Sisters* by images from classical mythology. For Candida, finding a new form of words is implicit in the inspiration she derives from Virgil, an enthusiasm that traces back to her school-girl days. Candida's journey enhances her ability to identify with others and brings the promise of reconciliation with her daughter, Ellen. She is prompted to review her marriage with Andrew and its failure, and comes to the conclusion that she must learn to grow old before she dies. She learns gradually that old age is an effort – one must simply keep going – and the novel ends on that, perhaps muted, note of expectation.

The ambiguity and subtlety of the age consciousness described in these four disparate novels can be regarded from a gerontological perspective as symptomatic of a changing imaginative consciousness about the ageing process. This emerging richness and diversity is a central theme of Gullette's book, and one that she associates with contemporary efforts to replace the paramount decline narrative. If the balance between the decline narrative and progressive elements in stories of ageing displays an underlying volatility and ambiguity, this reminds us of the pervasive biomedical 'truth' that to grow older is to face the prospect of decline into death; an outcome with which Gullette and the novelists reviewed in this account imaginatively and realistically contend.

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Address for correspondence

Mike Hepworth, Department of Sociology, Edward Wright Building,
University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3QY, UK.

e-mail: soco80@abdn.ac.uk