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Surplus to Requirements? The Ageing Body in Contemporary Irish Writing

Margaret O'Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh

Introduction

The Celtic Tiger followed by its aftermath of recession provides a pertinent context in which to explore literary representations of midlife and older age. The dramatic rise and fall of Ireland's economy over the past three decades has brought substantial changes to Irish social life. In the 1990s and early 2000s, with low unemployment rates and rising incomes, many people had more disposable earnings and Irish society was driven by consumerism. However, the growth was disproportionate, exacerbating the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest. With the collapse in 2008, economic recession and austerity programmes intensified deeply entrenched inequalities. Against this backdrop, the nature, experience, and representation of ageing have evolved to meet the ideal constructions of contemporary capitalist society. The drive towards production and consumerism elevates the young, fit, and healthy. It gives rise to a certain fetishization of youth in a commodified, sexualised global culture which, in contemporary Ireland, "may have been intensified by a collective sense of liberation from a censorious and highly repressive brand of Catholicism" (Ging, 59). Surrounded by images of idealised beauty, women's social value is often tied to their ability to maintain socially prescribed standards of youthful attractiveness, while men's experiences of ageing are informed by ideals of activity and performance. Despite representing an increasingly large proportion of the population, "the old" are perceived through narratives of decline (Gullette, 1997), facing marginalisation, exclusion, and invisibility in a society focused on progress, youthfulness, and consumerism.

As we aim to show in this chapter, Irish writing is increasingly speaking back against such ageist social assumptions by foregrounding the subjective, embodied experience of ageing. In a society that emphasises individualism and competitiveness, participants are called upon to manage their bodies, and hide their weaknesses. This ideology lends itself to the repudiation of vulnerability and dependency. In contrast, narratives informed by the experiences of growing older often express different kinds of subjectivities through reclaiming personal vulnerability and connection as opposed to the disembodied rationality that underpins the competitive ideals of consumer capitalism. This movement can be observed across genres, and it explores midlife through to deep old age. A critical analysis of recent Irish literature that centralises ageing helps to unveil the influence of social forces on how the body is perceived and managed. This

approach can unsettle the blueprint of “successful ageing” by illuminating the impossibilities of ideal gender and age performances that we are compelled to pursue but never realise, allowing for a fuller, more inclusive, and autonomous vision of later life.

Reclaiming Middle Age

Irish literature of the last two decades invites a revised consideration of the assumptions of middle age. It queries social stereotypes and refutes the stigmas associated with ageing. It also demonstrates that in a neoliberal climate in which men and women in middle age are expected to live up to gendered ideals of health and happiness, largely through their purchasing power, the pressure to perform can result in experiences of overwhelm and powerlessness. This section reads across a selection of fiction, poetry, and life writing by women and men in which authors are reclaiming middle age, revealing the myriad of ways people can inhabit and narrate the self.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of the personal essay in Ireland. The rise of the genre is perhaps connected to social activism underscoring the personal nature of the political, seen in the movement for marriage equality in 2015 and the campaign, in 2018, to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Irish constitution so that Irish women could access abortions. Invoking the persuasive power and visceral force of personal testimony, the essay has become the privileged form to reclaim embodied experience, including the recovery of middle age from narratives of decline and invisibility. Two celebrated collections, Sinead Gleeson’s *Constellations* (2019) and Emilie Pine’s *Notes to Self* (2018), centre how life is inscribed on the body, as they also reflect on the politics of the female body in Ireland. They deal with issues of family, fertility, illness, bereavement, and growing older. These collections have important predecessors in Nuala O’Faolain’s memoirs *Are You Somebody?* (1996) and *Almost There* (2003), in which, by addressing a number of taboo topics including female midlife, O’Faolain “re-wrote the place of Irish women in the autobiographical canon” (Lynch 161). As O’Faolain claims in *Almost There*, “Middle age is the least talked about of all seasons of life, and yet it seems to me the most exacting. It is adolescence come again at the other side of adulthood – the matching bookend – in its uneasiness of identity, its physical surprises and the strength it takes to handle it” (28). Her “report on middle age” (2003, 22) in her first memoir is largely a bleak one, chiming in with the cultural narrative of ageing as decline. It also reflects the widely reported experience that women who show visible signs of ageing are rendered “socially and sexually invisible” (Bouson 1). As O’Faolain puts it, “a woman past the age where she might be contemplated as a sexual partner is hardly seen. [...] She could become a ‘character’ – in Ireland, anyway. But

being avidly watched because you might at any minute make everybody laugh is a parody of being watched because you are desired” (1996, 179-180). O’Faolain wonders whether she might have a more positive attitude towards her physical ageing process if she’d had children or if she had been able to watch her parents grow old and care for them: “Time. I note every day the physical detail of middle age. The transparent polyps that have formed on the skin of my neck. The first white hair in my eyebrows. [...] If my mother had got old and I had been able to love her, would I be able to love my own ageing body now? If I had had children? How do people arrange to love their ageing selves?” (1996, 183). The sense of personal loss experienced by O’Faolain is embedded in a cultural context where in order to be “somebody” women have to be somebody’s daughter, wife, or mother. At the same time, O’Faolain’s considerations document how the ageing body is “fashioned within and by culture” since “dominant culture teaches us to feel bad about aging and to start this early, reading our body anxiously for signs of decay and decline” (Twigg 60-61).

Lending reason as to why women’s experiences of midlife are often grounded in stories of the body, Pine describes an argument with a friend, where he proclaimed his middle age while she denied it. Asking why she defended this position, she considers, “Perhaps because the signs that I am no longer young are unavoidable. Perhaps because the label ‘middle-aged’ was, for him, just a phrase, not an actual bodily change” (107). Pine describes, for instance, the ways her body changed approaching menopause in her late thirties as an “alien” transition (107). In another essay, she however describes forty as a “positive boundary” following her painful struggle with infertility; a point at which she has chosen happiness and given herself “permission to be someone else, someone other than a mother” (76). The difficult process of breaking down the variety and force of perspectives on ageing that inform society’s as well as one’s personal view, on the route to self-acceptance, is also apparent in the personal essay *Four Sides Full* (2016) by poet Vona Groarke. By exploring her failed marriage and the break-up of her family home as necessitating her adjustment to a more self-oriented, if lonely life, Groarke lends a personal note to the challenges faced by many women in their fifties. Repudiating essentialist constructions of age, she disrupts the narrative of decline, which is always by definition linear: “I don’t think I want a narrative, however partial or skewed. I am maybe younger now than I was ten years ago” (69). Likewise, she refuses to let herself be defined by her ageing body, instead viewing her body as a “frame” (49) in which she lives, which during menopause “has actively turned on me” (50) and which harbours multiple versions of herself, like a “Matryoshka doll” (69). Reclaiming their experiences of midlife, Pine and Groarke speak

back to a culture of silence on the body, sexuality, and desire of a woman beyond her childbearing years.

In her prose collection *Object Lessons* (1995), Eavan Boland decried the “inbuilt resistance to a woman ageing” in the Irish poetic tradition and described her struggle to write poems “to grow old [...] and die in,” as she puts it in her poem “A Woman Painted on a Leaf” (210). Boland’s poems challenge representations of eternally young goddesses, icons, and heroines in Irish literature and myth by reclaiming the embodied subjectivity of a woman “neither young now nor fertile” (Irish Goddess, 151). As she writes in “Anna Liffey”:

An ageing woman
Finds no shelter in language.
She finds instead
Single words she once loved
Such as ‘summer’ and ‘yellow’
And ‘sexual’ and ‘ready’
Have suddenly become dwellings
For someone else –
Rooms and a roof under which someone else
is welcome, not her. [...] (Anna Liffey, 203)

Boland’s work prepared the way for the next generation of Irish poets, including Mary O’Donnell, Eileen Casey, and Groarke, whose poems explore both the pressures and pleasures of female midlife in Celtic Tiger Ireland. Seeking to avoid the fate of invisibility (King 2013), middle-aged women are susceptible to the trappings of the anti-ageing industry in a culture that tends to conflate beauty with youthfulness. The cult of youth is critically explored in O’Donnell’s poem “Following Frida”, which addresses the pressure on middle-aged women to adhere to prescribed standards of beauty and youth, even if this requires cosmetic surgery. Women are enticed to smooth away all signs of their “ups and downs”, the personal life stories inscribed on their bodies:

Kiss, kiss! Kiss, kiss! he urges. His short needle
makes cushions of our worries. Little prick here,

another there, *there, there*

it's all right darlings, growing old

needn't hurt so badly. (Following Frida, 14)

The poem however ends with a fantasy of rebellion against the oppression of the beauty industry, symbolised by a male surgeon, with women expressing their desire to “behold ourselves, mirror-wise, the women we always were / just older, looser, still there” (14). Likewise, in “Subjunctive”, Eileen Casey sarcastically comments on a male doctor’s culturally conditioned assumption that her blood-flooded eye may have a variety of causes ranging from constipation to advanced age, but omitting the more pleasurable possibilities of “Laughter (the belly wobbling kind) / Sex (strenuous) / Dance (Hip Hop, Salsa, Tango)” (Subjunctive, 97). Finally, Groarke’s middle-aged poetic speakers lay claim to their own physical needs and desires, paying no heed to social views that deem them “too old / for such love songs” (Love Songs, 49).¹

In fiction, Marian Keyes explores the subject of how outwardly successful women deal with, or hide away, their vulnerabilities to meet social expectations at this stage of life. It is an issue that Keyes also considers in memoir. Her works chart the lives of Irish women over the course of the economic boom and the recession that followed. They attend to “the realities of Irish women, postfeminist women who were still living in a patriarchal society” (Keyes in interview with Ingle, 2017) and write against the widespread assumption that the goals of feminism are no longer needed (O’Neill, 2020). In an essay entitled “Turning Fifty”, Keyes acknowledges that when she was in her twenties she thought that there was a secret formula for happiness but approaching fifty she accepts “that happiness is simply one of thousands of emotions any person will experience in a life” (2016, 322). Her novel *Grown Ups* (2020) further explores what it means to ‘grow up’. It is written from the perspectives of several members of the Casey family, across generations. Sisters-in-law Jessie and Cara both struggle with the pressures of middle age. Jessie is a successful businesswoman who grew a chain of specialist food stores during the boom, but she is struggling to survive the economic downturn, the pressure to look young, and constant feelings of inadequacy: “*Next month I’ll be fifty and, seriously, what’s the age when a person finally feels safe and secure? Because I really thought it would have happened by now.* [...] She’d done a lot with her life. She *had*. Five children, a happy marriage – it *was* happy, wasn’t it? Running a profitable company, employing more than fifty people, her life was a success” (206). Compulsive spending provides a welcome relief to her stresses and anxieties. As well as shopping designer fashion online, she insists on treating the entire family to lavish

parties and getaways. Cara suffers from a different addiction. On the surface happily married and thriving in her role as head receptionist in the most exclusive hotel in Dublin, scenes of secret binging and vomiting reveal that “Her self-loathing was monumental” (165). Cara’s history of issues with eating had been somewhat under control, only to resurface in middle age with renewed dissatisfaction with her body image. When she is finally admitted to hospital for a Bulimia seizure, “all of her secrets were written in her body” (327). Over the past twenty years, Keyes’ protagonists have grown into middle age with the author, and *Grown Ups* reveals the intensifying contradictions between personal, embodied life and socially constructed expectations. Keyes demonstrates that the pressure to succeed by midlife, to be ‘grown up’, takes a mental and physical toll on the body.²

The discourse on middle age in Irish writing has tended to focus on women. As Susan Sontag argues in her landmark essay “The Double Standard of Ageing” (1979), growing older afflicts women more than men, as they are judged more by physical appearance, and as Pine observes, the experience of middle age can be an acutely embodied one for women. However, Irish literature is also increasingly challenging the weary cultural representations and damaging social stereotypes often imposed on men. In doing so, these texts explore the embodied experiences of men in middle age that are frequently at odds with characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as power, youth, virility, physical strength, and performance (Calasanti and King, 10-11). Thus, in Keyes’ *Grown Ups*, Jessie’s husband Johnny, approaching fifty, is exhausted by the constant demands life places on him, as his wife’s second husband and business partner, father of five, and eldest brother in a large and demanding family: “He felt about a hundred and twenty. It never stopped. It. Just. Never. *Stopped*” (159). He yearns for a lazy Sunday afternoon, a holiday, or a man’s equivalent of a spa break, “Except he suspected that that would probably involve chopping down trees to build his own shelter, which sounded even more stressful” (160). Johnny’s quiet desperation, his feeling of being “hollow” (247; 248; 267) contrasts with clichéd scenarios for male midlife crises.³

The topic of men’s middle age is also explored in fiction and drama by Roddy Doyle, in poetry by Paul Durcan, and in life writing by Michael Harding. Doyle is one of the foremost Irish writers exploring men’s middle age. Across genres, his darkly comic works attend to issues of midlife and mortality, for instance his short story collection *Bullfighting* (2011), his play *Two Pints* (2012), and most recently his novel *Love* (2020).⁴ As he comments, “It’s interesting getting older, mortality, slowing down, speeding up in some ways. Time, the things it does to you. The sense of redundancy when your children grow up and they don’t need you” (Jamieson 2019). In his novel *The Guts* (2013), set in a North Dublin suburb during the post-2008

recession, Jimmy Rabbitte, creator of the Irish soul band *The Commitments* thirty years earlier, is now forty-seven, married, with four children, and bowel cancer. Jimmy's thoughts, relationships, and experiences are enmeshed in prevailing beliefs about men and their sexual bodies, and conflation of illness with ageing. In one scene, Jimmy decides to have an affair between his chemotherapy sessions in an effort to resist the reality of his middle age, as well as his mortality. Both his mindset and his body have been jolted by his diagnosis and treatment. Seeking consolation, he considers that "A woman fancied him. Simple as that. An attractive – that was the word – an attractive woman looked at him and saw someone, a man, she wanted to ride. It was great" (112). Jimmy here imagines himself to be desired, like a woman or a commodity, buying into established consumerist narratives of successful ageing.

The pressures of midlife employment are also foregrounded in *The Guts*. An economy imbued with "middle-ageism", Gulleto asserts, is "changing what it means to be human" (2015, 25). Ageism affects younger as well as older people, as social narratives inform people's expectations for their own life course as well as how they value others as they age (21). "The gravest effect on our vision of the lifecourse", according to Gulleto, "comes from destroying the underlying principle of seniority: that people deserve more respect and rising wages – not automatic deflations – as they grow older" (25). During a time when family life is most expensive, "Eliminating midlife workers has become a tacit business practice and a disastrous capitalist trend" (24). In *The Guts*, his job is an overwhelming concern for Jimmy, who has four teenage children. And yet, Jimmy recognises that he is privileged. He hit on the idea of building a presence for forgotten Irish punk on kelticpunk.com. Just before the crash, he sold 75 per cent of the business and paid off the mortgage. His timing was perfect. "Three years into a recession that still felt like it was just starting, life was a bit safe – if he forgot that he had cancer for a minute. [...] The world was in shit but shiterock was making money" (47). Jimmy has negotiated the market in a manner which epitomises the ideal neoliberal subject; he capitalises on mid-life crisis culture to successfully sell middle-age nostalgia. However, music is his passion, and Jimmy equates his grief at selling the company to that which he will feel when the kids grow up and leave. The pain of selling is to Jimmy so pervasive, "like physical pain, across his head, in his face, in his shoulders, through his stomach", that "There was once – just once [...] the thought it had kicked off the cancer. He was literally going to end up what he was – gutless. And dead [...] But bills – fuckin' money – terrified him" (47). Despite the financial burden of cancer on family, daily life, and well-being, under neoliberalism the question of whether to remain in paid employment is seen as a matter of individual choice, a rational deliberation about costs and gains without reference to constraints such as limited welfare

benefits. *The Guts* demonstrates the realities of an economy in which the pressure to live up to ideals of youth, masculine performance, and the values of entrepreneurship deeply affects individuals' health, families, and home lives.

In contrast to Doyle, Paul Durcan's poetry in his collection *The Art of Life* (2004) addresses midlife in terms of a middle-aged man's loneliness, anxiety, and sense of futility, frequently tempered by a tone of self-deprecating humour. In "Achill Island Man", the speaker wakes up in Achill to find himself "in the Amusements Arcade of my own body / [...] / Toes! Knees! Elbows! Shoulder-blades! / Everywhere I look, small pink balls of pain" (9). Pondering his possible illnesses and the impending funeral of his seventy-one-year-old neighbour as a harbinger of his own demise, the poem ends with the speaker's decision to return home and have a number of pints in his local pub: "And after that I will go home and have my dinner / And after dinner I will go to bed and begin / The whole story all over again – isn't that it?" (10). In another poem, "A Robin in Autumn Chirping at Dawn", the man is described through the eyes of a robin: "He was middle-aged, overweight, weary, anxious. / Quite like myself" (7). The desolate figure of "the forlorn middle-aged man" (7) evokes protective impulses in the small bird, who is depicted as finding joy in the moment and marvelling at the self-pitying attitude of his human counterpart: "Middle age for any creature is a problematic plummet / But why do humans have to be so crestfallen about it?" (8). In his poems ranging from ordinary encounters in shopping malls to celebrations of the birth of his granddaughter, Durcan records the "upbeat, yet melancholy" experience of traversing through what he calls "the autumn of my days" (*Facing Extinction*, 118).

Harding's memoir *Staring at Lakes* (2013) similarly explores illness and depression in middle age. Starting out like a conventional narrative about a married man's midlife crisis – "By the summer of 2007, I was pushing myself. I was getting old. I sensed time running out. I was in the last-chance saloon" (19) – the memoir soon comes to explore the trauma of sudden physical illness, followed by depression, which gives way to intense physical self-loathing and a sense of emasculation. The insight gained from struggling through his physical and mental illness includes the acceptance of his own vulnerability, which in men is often perceived as weakness: "To be vulnerable is human. And the shame that keeps us silent and makes men wear a warrior's shield at all times and pretend to be invincible is something less than human. Shame and silence make men into caricatures of humanity that crash in middle age and die alone. I was beginning to read my illness with a new mind" (201). Thus, Harding attends to the institutionalised shame built on gendered expectations of behaviour that can cause men to don emotional armour, as well as to the possibility for personal and social change.

Reimagining Old Age

Characters in their seventies or older increasingly populate Irish literature, and not just “as a peg on which to hang observations about social change in Ireland [...] but [...] for their own sake” (Ingman, 145). By allowing insight into an interior life often at odds with a character’s outward perception, these texts counterbalance and complicate stereotypes about old age. They also frequently serve to assess social and cultural changes by means of life reviews presented through the characters’ embodied subjectivities. In doing so they give a voice to older characters that traditionally might have been relegated to the margins of literary works or portrayed in stereotypical, mythically elevated or parodist ways. Nuanced approaches are found in Joseph O’Connor’s *Ghost Light* (2010), Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart* (2012), Anne Enright’s *The Green Road* (2015), and Anne Griffin’s *When All is Said* (2019). Steering clear of one-dimensional depictions of old age, they all fashion subjective life narratives that embody the speakers in a specific socio-cultural moment in time. In Ryan and Griffin this is achieved through first-person narration, in O’Connor, unusually, through second-person narration, and, in Enright, by attending to the psychic impact of ageing (Fogarty, 2018).

O’Connor’s *Ghost Light* presents a fictional biography of the Irish actor Molly Allgood, who in her old age lives a life of poverty and isolation in 1950s London. Accompanied by her memories, the ghostly presence of her lost love, J.M. Synge, and indeed the reader by way of the ‘you’ narration, Molly, as she traverses the city, extends the perceived limitations of her age and lowly social status (O’Neill, 2017). In Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart*, Lily is one of the characters who gets to tell her story in her own voice. Having raised her five children on her own by prostituting her body, in old age she lives her life as a social outcast, shunned even by her children, who are “pure solid ashamed of me, after all I done for them” (30). Lily is aware that the social perception of herself is that of a “witch” (30). While her precise age remains unclear, she admits: “I haven’t aged well; I look a lot older than I am. I have rheumatoid arthritis. It pains me everywhere” (30). Although it would be easy to turn Lily’s story of a lifetime of abuse into one of victimhood, Ryan avoids this by creating a sense of agency: “sure wasn’t I at least the author of my own tale?” (34). Rosaleen, the ageing matriarch of Enright’s *The Green Road*, embodies mythical overtones to query them, reminiscent of Boland’s poetic speakers. As Anne Fogarty describes, “Rosaleen is at once a Jungian *magna mater*, a potent symbol of archaic feminine power, a reordered vision of the woman as symbol of Ireland, a flawed novelistic character, a female incarnation of King Lear and a psychologically exact portrait of an ageing woman in modern Ireland” (134). Rosaleen’s journey on the Green Road compels the reader to discard these myths of femininity and ageing and consider the conditions

and constraints affecting older women in contemporary Ireland. Finally, Griffin's *When All is Said* centres on a male protagonist, Maurice Hannigan, a wealthy farmer and landowner in his mid-eighties, who spends the last night of his life sitting by himself in a hotel bar and raising five toasts to the five most important people in his life. In the course of the novel, Maurice aligns himself with various stereotypes of ageing masculinity ranging from "the drunk old raving fool" (235) to the "cranky-arsed father" (191) but the novel effectively complicates and challenges these labels by providing insight into his emotional vulnerabilities. These narratives, which situate the reader both within and outside the protagonists' consciousness, prompt reconsideration of ageist assumptions and revaluation of how we measure personal and social progress, to stimulate an alternative "lifecourse imaginary" (Gullette, 2017, 57).

Turning to deep old age, in Harding's second memoir, *Hanging with the Elephant* (2014), the theme of ageing is explored through the lens of both Hardings' own midlife and his mother's old age. The book engages with the author's grieving process over his mother's death at the age of ninety-six, with his reflections on his own ageing leading him to imagine his mother's life, including her loneliness in old age, beyond limiting cultural stereotypes such as the "the eternal mother, the great Mammy" (225). As he notes, "As I get older I come closer to the type of isolation in which my mother had lived for years" (273). The memoir tackles the intricate biological and social factors combining to marginalise and isolate older people, emphasising that despite the signs of ageing inscribed on the mother's body, and her increased physical frailty, she inwardly remains the same person: "Even in old age, she still had an insatiable desire to connect with other people [...], which is why it was all so devastating for her in the end. And why the silent doorbell and the phone that never rang broke her heart in old age, and why, when depression came, it came with a vengeance. At ninety, no one called. And she grew bitter" (144). By piecing together his mother's life story with the help of her curt diary entries – "*Stayed up to watch the New Year on television. Nobody rang*" (118) – old photographs, memorabilia, items of clothing, and other personal belongings, her son, alongside the reader, comes closer to understanding the mother's "complex layerings of identity" (Segal 4). In his memoir, Harding pays attention to the material dimensions of a lived life, in this case a life spanning almost a century. As he notes, "Her story was never told. But the interior of her house held it all. The museum of useless stuff she left in her wake was as eloquent as a novel" (160). On his quest for his mother's story, as well as in his attempt to make sense of his own ageing, Harding suggests that loneliness and depression in old age may not be inevitable but are in a large part caused by social marginalisation, poverty, and exclusion:

Old people shrink, retreat and dissolve into the bland paintwork of a doctor's waiting room. And now I see myself dissolving, because I am next in line and young ones are already dancing in spaces where soon I too will not belong. And it's the cold in an old person's house that does the damage, when the electricity becomes too expensive and the damp creeps up [...] until the entire house is musty and smells of old age. (245)

Discovering his mother's story in the material objects held by her house, Harding also dwells on the shame he feels for uprooting his mother in her old age. For lack of an alternative, he had to place her in a nursing home, thus depriving her not only of her familiar surroundings but of her "home" (247). The memoir gestures to the ways in which care is outsourced and vulnerable bodies are relegated to the margins of neoliberal, market-oriented societies, as, with the arrival of the Celtic Tiger, "People became oppressed by mortgages and they couldn't stay at home and so the old folks went off to nursing homes" (213).

Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* (2008) provides insight into an older protagonist's sense of abandonment and lack of agency in a residential institution. The novel's main setting is Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital, where the protagonist, centenarian Roseanne McNulty, has spent more than sixty years of her adult life. Roseanne represents frail old age, the age group most at risk of "discursive 'othering' [...] which excludes the aged person from the everyday life of society and casts him or her into a position defined equally by its alienation and its vulnerability" (Higgs and Gilleard, 10). Recalling the story of her youth inevitably brings back memories of her once legendary beauty and causes Roseanne to compare the memory of her younger self to her present aged self, in her own words: "a thing left over, a remnant woman, and I do not even look like a human being no more" (4). Other derogatory self-images she offers include a "songless robin" and a dead, mummified "mouse" (4). Her hands, we learn, "look like they have been buried a while and then dug up" and she tells her reader, "They would give you a fright" (145-146). We also find that she has "not looked in a mirror for about fifteen years" (146). As Victoria Bazin and Rosie White note, "age seems to be the last difference, the unspoken but inevitable site of difference not only *between* subjects but also a difference *within* subjects as they are exiled from their younger selves" (ii). Alienated from her own aged body, Roseanne feels that her younger self still resides within her. Recalling her younger and happier days in Sligo she ponders: "Who was I then? A stranger, but a stranger that hides in me still, in my bones and my blood. That hides in this wrinkled suit of skin. The girl I was" (131).

Given her extraordinary old age and the mystery surrounding her past, Roseanne might easily be lent to mythic elevation. As her psychiatrist Dr Grene notes: "Roseanne's life spans

everything, she is as much as we can know of our world, the last hundred years of it. She should be a place of pilgrimage and a national icon” (190). Likewise, Roseanne tries to make sense of her aged existence by turning to familiar images of old age in Irish folklore and myth, for instance referring to herself as the “cailleach, [...] the old crone of stories” (102). Yet as author of her story, Roseanne reclaims her agency precisely by rejecting the timelessness and agelessness represented by such mythical figures, not unlike Boland’s repudiation and reconfiguration of Irish myth. By deciding to leave behind her own testimony, rather than have her story authored by others, Roseanne turns herself, as she puts it, into “the midwife to my own old story” (102). At the same time, the novel troubles official historical accounts of institutionalisation, gesturing towards the numerous unheard, forgotten victims of state and church, who were “sectioned [...] for social rather than medical reasons” (17). These include “those fifty ancient women in the central block, so old that age has become something eternal, continuous, so bedridden and encrusted with sores that to move them would be a sort of violation” (16). Given the chance, so the novel suggests, each of these nameless “sisters, mothers, grandmothers, spinsters” (33) would have a story to tell and, like Roseanne, each of them would be found to be “admirable, living, and complete” (309).

The discourse of age, Kathleen Woodward observes, “pivots on the blunt binary of young and old” (1999, xvii), an opposition embedded in consumer culture, in which the figure of the older woman is given to represent “the so called ravages of time” (vxi). Roseanne’s secret scripture is one of several emerging narratives in Irish writing that address this gap in contemporary discourse, to demonstrate ageing as lifelong experience. Bringing nuanced subjectivities as well as acknowledgement of shared frailties, they expose the ways that a capitalist neoliberal society disregards ageing people and other unwanted bodies, and demonstrate how new attention to these kinds of subjectivities might offer us all an alternative to the neoliberal, disembodied rationality that we have been indoctrinated to naturalize.⁵

Writing about Dementia

As life expectancy increases and the experience of dementia is becoming more widespread, this theme is also increasingly taken on by Irish writers. In his collection *The Laughter of Mothers* (2007), Paul Durcan poignantly addresses his mother’s final years in an Alzheimer’s nursing home, where she is “deprived of her agency and autonomy” (Schrage-Früh 2018, 86). In fiction, Clare Boylan explores the theme in her novel *Beloved Stranger* (1999), in which, as a demented father’s “increasing violence and paranoia highlight implicit patriarchal family structures, his

growing disorientation yet renders him vulnerable and dependent” (O’Neill and Schrage-Früh 2020, 185; cf. also Schrage-Früh 2017). Similarly, in drama, Frank McGuinness’s *The Hanging Gardens* (2013) centres on the ageing patriarch Sam, a novelist, who seeks reconciliation with his children as he experiences symptoms of dementia (O’Neill and Schrage-Früh 2020, 179-181). These narratives, as they emphasise the ageing journey as personal but also interdependent and nourished by connection, are in keeping with Heike Hartung’s observation that “narratives of dementia mark the limits of development and of age narrative by representing the end of consciousness and the end of the liberal narrative of the autonomous subject”, while simultaneously such narratives also “push against this limit, questioning notions of progress, autonomy and personhood” (3).

Dementia is an important theme in recent life writing. In Ian Maleney’s *Minor Monuments* (2019), it is the grandfather’s retreat into Alzheimer’s disease that forms the central focal point in a personal essay collection exploring questions of home, family, and identity. Maleney records both the everyday challenges facing the family in terms of care work and emotional strain, as well as the personal and cultural implications of a certain form of rural community life slipping away alongside his grandfather John Joe’s mental and physical capacities. And yet, despite the “sense of decline and inevitability” (134), scenes in which John Joe, who increasingly forgets his family members and friends, sings along to the radio are particularly poignant as they gesture towards the personal and cultural archive of emotion that perseveres: “He sang old songs, the songs all old people know. [...] He had forgotten most of everything, but scraps of melody remained. They were hidden in that part of the brain where treasures are kept, alongside the name of his wife, Kathleen” (24). In highlighting such moments of recognition, Maleney writes against the notion that a person suffering from Alzheimer’s is “a person who has no value at all” (177).

Similarly, one of the essays in Gleeson’s *Constellations*, “Second Mother”, is about the author’s dearly loved aunt Terry and her slow drift into dementia. Gleeson describes the cruelty of the disease as the stealth by which it takes the body: “This illness transforms only the interior. The body becomes less a prison than an aquarium. Visitors, the people you love, looking in, regarding the body-snatched version of your mind. You, looking out, your whole worldview distorted as if by water and that thick, impermeable membrane” (228). Unlike a physical illness, the exterior may remain the same, but personality alters, and memory deteriorates. There remains however a deep connection between aunt and niece in these years of decline. The tie between them is not diminished, regardless of the space opened out. The way Terry lived her life and stayed true to herself in the face of the restraints that forced generations of women to

cede “Love, art or independence” (224) influenced Gleeson in a way that surpasses this gulf. She describes their connection: “One of us is in a boat, the other on the land. She is so still these days, so quiet, that it must be her up there on the cliff top looking down. I am the traveller departing, tilting on the riptide” (232). The process of ageing here might be described as one of reorientation, relocating oneself in relation to time, memory, and loved ones. This process engenders pain as well as anticipation. It cannot be separated from sensory perceptions or from memory, as “the story of our lives is still the story of one body” (17).

Ageing Futures

This chapter has been written during the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, a time during which ageist assumptions have come to the fore in public discussions about older people’s (market) value. In Ireland, the older population is directed to ‘cocoon’, separated from everyone else and perceived as society’s most fragile bodies. However, growing older does not justify a loss of bodily autonomy, or the dignity of taking responsibility for one’s own choice to protect oneself and others. How society chooses to treat the older population at such a time of crisis is indicative of Ireland’s social future. An age-oriented focus on Irish literature allows us to consider the ways in which writers are presenting the ageing body from the inside out, acknowledging our shared vulnerability, as opposed to the impermeable, eternally youthful self, constructed to meet the ideals of contemporary capitalist culture. As Irish writers and readers continue to embrace new understandings of ageing, there is transformative social potential to be found in this reorientation.

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¹ For a detailed exploration of female middle age and sexual desire in Irish poetry see Katarzyna Ostalska and Eileen Casey.

² For an extended exploration of the narrative roles of middle-aged women in post-Celtic Tiger fiction, with close attention to work by Kevin Barry, Mike McCormack, and Eimear McBride, see Deirdre Flynn.

³ For an exploration of similar midlife fatigue afflicting couples in their forties during the Celtic Tiger, in drama by Marina Carr, see Mária Kurdi.

⁴ For an analysis of Doyle’s representations of middle age in *Bullfighting* and *Two Pints*, see Burcu Gülüm Tekin.

⁵ For an examination of the fourth age, or deep old age, through the narrativization of individual ageing experiences in Jennifer Johnston’s later fiction, see Carmen Zamorano Llena.