"When I'm 73 and in Constant Good Tumour":
Poetic Responses to Ageing from Jenny Joseph to Fleur Adcock

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Abstract. Modern poetry frequently challenges conventional narratives of ageing as uneventful and conformist through temporalities that undercut familiar archetypes, reject expected performativities, and upend canonical chronotopes, thereby questioning reductive chronological prisms through which ageing is commonly defined. Comical carnivalesque visions by Jenny Joseph ("Warning" (1961)) and Roger McGough ("Let Me Die a Youngman's Death" (1967)) celebrate ageing as a liberation from oppressive social norms, presenting the ageing body as the ultimate counterculture fetish that eludes social control. Wistful vignettes by Ted Hughes ("Old Age Gets Up" (1979)) and Margaret Atwood ("A Visit" (1995)) foreground the difficulties of narrating ageing from an outward perspective, and experiment with nonconformist chronotopes to give ageing a voice. Confessional poems like Fleur Adcock's "Mrs Baldwin" (2013) invite the reader to experience ageing vicariously by creating a collage-like fragment whose circularities align ageist signification with human signification at large. Collectively, these poems underscore the importance of moving beyond reductive lenses on ageing, and highlight the difficulties of narrativizing a process which by its very nature upends conventional modes of representation.

Keywords Jenny Joseph, Roger McGough, Ted Hughes, Margaret Atwood, Fleur Adcock

1. Introduction

In the Western lyrical tradition, ageing is customarily represented through paradigms of decay, characterised by a sapping of strength and a weakening of mental faculties, with few gains offsetting such decline. Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 likens old age to a fire burning "on the ashes of [...] youth" (Shakespeare 2002, 527); Coleridge's "Youth and Age" speaks of a "body that does me grievous wrong" (Coleridge 1975, 439); Thomas Hardy describes the ageing body

as a "fragile frame" that makes one "grieve" the loss of better days (Hardy 1965, 72); and Matthew Arnold speaks of a gradual downward trajectory with "every function less exact / Each nerve moore loosely strung" (Arnold 1995, 409).

Rarely does ageing elicit positive associations, and when that is the case, its benefits seem outweighed by physical and mental ailments. In "The Coming Of Wisdom With Time", William Butler Yeats describes ageing as a "wither[ing] into the truth" (Yeats 1951, 92), humorously questioning the purposefulness of acquiring knowledge in old age. Writers also customarily deny ageing bodies the capacity to experience a sense of fulfilment, as in William Blake's "The Ecchoing Green", where Old John, an embodiment of old age, "laugh[s] away care" in a futile attempt to negate the impending "darkening" of the "Green" symbolising his physical and mental decline (Blake 2008, 14).

Several twentieth and twenty-first century poets have challenged this normative paradigm of ageing as a tragic trajectory, viewing it as a process that has the capacity to be liberating and life-affirming. Jenny Joseph's "Warning" (1961) depicts old age through a carnivalesque lens as a phase that frees one from the social expectations. Similarly, Roger McGough's "Let Me Die a Youngman's Death" (1967) conjures up fantastical scenarios where a speaker's ageing alter ego stars in action movie-like scenes, asserting a lust for life commonly seen as incompatible with old age.

Later poets have challenged archetypal narratives on ageing by validating and dignifying the very process of ageing. Ted Hughes's "Old Age Gets Up" (1979) lovingly describes an older individual struggling to complete simple daily tasks. By collapsing temporal and spatial distinctions between imagination and physical surroundings, the poem conjures up a dream-like state that portrays ageing as profoundly human. Similarly, Margaret Atwood's "A Visit" (1995) sketches out an interaction with a dementia patient by blurring inner and outer worlds in a sea of imagery, thereby humanising the patient. In "Mrs Baldwin" (2013), Fleur Adcock explores ageing through a first-person perspective, using fragmentation and mental shortcuts to capture the speaker's unreliable recall, lending such experiences poignancy and relevance.

What unites these poems is their boldness and readiness to experiment with form. Recognizing altered perceptions of time as a defining characteristic of ageing, the poems play with multiple temporalities to question the authoritative status of a chronocentric perspective which regularly devalues 'old people' as unproductive, staid and alien. To demonstrate how these innovative approaches divert from representations of old age in canonical writing, the discussion shall

firstly examine the representation of old age in Blake's "Ecchoing Green" from the *Songs of Innocence* (1789), followed by a close reading of temporalities in the poems outlined above. The analysis considers a range of techniques through which old age and time are represented, ranging from a modulating of pace through syntactic features (like caesuras) to an eliciting of time through motifs (such as seasonal landscapes) and material objects (like clothing). By examining temporal representations of ageing in these lyrical pieces, the article hopes to draw attention to the ways through which committed artists have tried to dignify an undertheorized process that is fundamental to the human experience.

2. Chronocentrism in William Blake's "The Ecchoing Green" (1789)

Temporalities are a key dimension of any narrative, but attain particular significance in texts that deal with ageing. Spoken and written texts invariably rely on signifiers that are read sequentially, which makes the temporal processing by readers an integral part of any narrative. Playing with syntax can create the illusion of time running at different speeds, which can be used to represent a demographic in a particular way. Syntactic choices such as strategic line endings are often deployed to mimic the degree of liveliness associated with certain age groups, or to attribute varying degrees of agency and emotional fulfilment to a given generation.

Complementing such syntactic choices, poets may also evoke temporalities paradigmatically through diction that encapsulates time. References to seasons, historical periods, or mythical eras all ground a particular line or section in various temporalities, many of which bear rich socio-cultural connotations. Seasons, for example, are typically associated with different stages of life, with autumn symbolising old age. Such culturally marked "time spaces", which Mikhail Bakhtin calls "chronotopes" (Bakhtin 1981, 84), are central not only to the perception of time, but also to the ways in which certain age groups are conceptualised. Canonical texts frequently assert the validity of analogies between natural cycles and human nature, thereby normalising a chronocentric perception that valuates different generations to different degrees.

This matrix of syntactic (mimetic) and paradigmatic (semiotic) representations offers poets a wide range of ways in which ageing may be characterised. A good demonstration of different parameters at play offers Blake's "Ecchoing Green", where the two opening stanzas establish a multi-layered set of temporalities:

The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring.
The sky-lark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around.
To the bells['] che[e]rful sound.
While our sports shall be seen
On the Ecchoing Green.

Old John, with white hair
Does laugh away care,
Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk,
They laugh at our play.
And soon they all say,
Such, such were the joys[,]
When we all girls & boys[,]
In our youth-time were seen[,]
On the Ecchoing Green.
(Blake 2008, 13–14)

The bucolic landscape eulogised here teems with markers of spring expressed through archetypal celestial elements ("sun", "the skies"), stereotypical fauna ("skylark", "thrush", "birds of the bush") and artefacts ("merry bells"), ushering in two kinds of responses by the community: the "sports" and "play" of the young, which is observed and celebrated by the old. Many lines emphasise the cyclical nature of this spectacle. Present simple tense ("does arise", "make ... ring" etc.) situates the scene outside historical time, and likens it to a reoccurring seasonal event. The same idea is encapsulated in the term "Ecchoing Green", which connotes a lush landscape reverberating with sounds of constant renewal.

As a counterpoint to the joys of youth, the "old folk" underneath the oak tree (signifying age) do not experience joy but merely witness it, and recall memories of such moments. Old John, whose "white hair" is emblematic for his generation,

is characterised by worries about the imminent future; he "laugh[s] away care" analogous to how "the old folk / ... laugh at [the younger generation's] play", taking comfort in memories of better days. Laughter also feeds into a more explicit acknowledgment of the trials and tribulations of old age, contrasted with the glory of youth. The lines "[a]nd soon they all say, / Such, such were the joys..." signals a collective recognition of a shared burden shouldered by the "old folk". Their retreat into nostalgic reminiscing separates them from the energetic play by the young, whose "joys" they can only experience vicariously or through recall.

Various musical patterns reinforce this generational divide. Repetition in "'[s]uch, such were the joys" emphasises the old folk's nostalgia, while the rhyming of "Ecchoing Green" with "[i]n our youth-time were seen" contrasts physical vigour with passive observation. Blake's visual illustration (Fig. 1) reinforces this divide by showing the older generation seated underneath the tree while the young dance around it in a circle. Two youngsters have even been moved outside the image into the bottom half of the page where they frame the poem, a compositional choice that mimics their vitality. By way of contrast, a seated white-haired male figure (presumably Old John) is seen staring vacantly towards the left, rapt in a nostalgic reverie which is expressed both emotively (through his facial expression) and deictically (as his gaze runs counter to the left-to-right directionality of the written text). Old John, in other words, is looking *past* the youth playing in front of him back in time, searching for a narrative that brings comfort and joy.

The sprawl of the entire page likewise affects the reader's response to age and ageism. Rather than being hastened through the poem, readers are prompted to study ornamental intricacies such as the vines entangling the text, or the scraggly top half of the frame which mimics the squiggly vines of the bottom half. The reader is invited to share the vantage point of the "old folk" seated in the centre and admire the antics of the young encapsulated in a busy layout, suppressing their sorrows through laughter and joyful memories. The worries of old age, the mise-en-page suggests, cannot be undone but mitigated through escapist reveries elicited by younger generations.

Text and image, then, promote a collective 'laughing away' of old age through echoes of spring associated with the young. By defining it as passive and retrospective, the poem questions the relevance and value of old age. By suggesting that ageing individuals cannot experience joy but only recall such experiences, the text also normalises such chronocentrism syntactically (through the text), musically (through elements like repetition) and visually (through a sprawling layout).

Fig. 1. William Blake, "The Ecchoing Green", *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (London 1789, 1794), Yale Center for British Art (B1978.43.1546-1579B)[1].

3. Carnivalesque Visions in Jenny Joseph's "Warning" (1961) and Roger McGough's "Let Me Die a Youngman's Death" (1967)

A very different kind of laughter, much less nostalgic and far more irrever-ent, is evoked by Jenny Joseph and Roger McGough, whose carnivalesque visions temporarily displace conformist narratives of old age as burdensome,

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1   1 The illustration is from the Yale Center of British Art: https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms:2485. The image is in the Public Domain.

representing it as a period that liberates the ageing subject from the weight of conformity and social expectations. Jenny Joseph's "Warning" (1961), voted Britain's favourite poems in a BBC poll in the 1990s (Lister 1996), presents the reader with a humorous scenario in which the speaker imagines her ageing self as a cheeky iconoclast taking pleasure in subverting social norms:

> When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
> With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
> And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
> And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
> I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
> And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
> And run my stick along the public railings
> And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
> I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
> And pick flowers in other people's gardens
> And learn to spit.
>
> You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
> And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
> Or only bread and pickle for a week
> And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.
>
> But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
> And pay our rent and not swear in the street
> And set a good example for the children.
> We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.
>
> But maybe I ought to practise a little now?
> So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
> When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.
> (Joseph 1997, 29–30 [not paginated])

The levity with which the speaker rejects conventional dress codes ("wear purple / With a red hat which doesn't go"), financial security ("spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves"), moderation ("make up for the sobriety

of my youth") and common decency ("pick flowers in other people's garden") underscores how thoroughly she delights at the thought of subverting social norms. The speaker also lists more harmless impulsive actions by young children for which they would be reprimanded by parents or elders. "[S]itting down on the pavement", "run[ning] [one's] stick along the public railings", "go[ing] out in ... slippers in the rain" and "gobbl[ing] up samples in shops" constitute minor infractions children are taught to refrain from so as not to be a public nuisance.

The lightness of these misdemeanours, though, underscores the innocence of the speaker's desire, who seeks an off-ramp from a life of monotony and boredom. In the third stanza the persona identifies herself as a middle-class mother constrained by the strictures of conventionality, "pay[ing] [her] rent", "hav[ing] friends to dinner", and "set[ting] a good example for the children". The manner in which these obligations are listed ("But now we must...", "We must ...") suggests a temporary acceptance of these norms, along with a thinly disguised desire to subvert them ("[W]e must ... / ... not swear in the street").

The blandness of this third stanza, achieved through a clustering of end-stopped lines and generic vocabulary ("clothes that keep us dry") that contrasts with the colourfulness of the preceding lines ("shall wear purple / With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me"), presents the speaker as calmly accepting those impositions for the benefit of her children's education, but only temporarily. The final three lines signal a return to the tone of the opening salvo, ushered in by the innocent-sounding "[b]ut maybe I ought to practise a little now?", and sustained by a public "shocked and surprised" at the persona's irreverence. Reverting to the carnivalesque in the end defines it as the narrative's equilibrium which the speaker accepts as her new normal, replacing modes of proper decorum with a vision of irreverence, iconoclasm and individuality.

The rejuvenating effect this rebellion has on the speaker is visually amplified in the illustrated version, where drawings accompanying the opening line "When I am an old woman" shows a blurred ageing face with a dejected look, in contrast to the final four lines, which are accompanied by an energetic, much younger woman whose reflection seeks eye contact with the viewer (Joseph 1997, 2–3, 29–30 [not paginated]). Text and image, then, represent the speaker's carnivalesque as a form of catharsis that is life-affirming because it challenges the way old age is conceptualised, and because it allows for a permeability of social barriers that are usually ruled out in mainstream discourse on old age.

Similar carnivalesque code-switching defines Roger McGough's "Let Me Die A Youngman's Death" (1967), where the speaker imagines himself as starring in a series of action-movie-like vignettes which become increasingly hyperbolic and surreal with each lived decade:

> Let me die a youngman's death
> not a clean and inbetween
> the sheets holywater death
> not a famous-last-words
> peaceful out of breath death
>
> When I'm 73
> and in constant good tumour
> may I be mown down at dawn
> by a bright red sports car
> on my way home
> from an allnight party
>
> Or when I'm 91
> with silver hair
> and sitting in a barber's chair
> may rival gangsters
> with hamfisted tommyguns burst in
> and give me a short back and insides
>
> Or when I'm 104
> and banned from the Cavern
> may my mistress
> catching me in bed with her daughter
> and fearing for her son
> cut me up into little pieces
> and throw away every piece but one
>
> Let me die a youngman's death
> not a free from sin tiptoe in
> candle wax and waning death

> not a curtains drawn by angels borne
> 'what a nice way to go' death
> (Henri et al. 1983, 105)

Resembling a fever dream, the poem replaces the sacred for the profane and casts the narrative voice as a swaggering gangster battling rivals and indulging in multiple affairs, heedless of the consequences. The nonchalant *carpe diem* attitude expressed in tone and deed evoke a recklessness typically associated with the young. Silly internal rhymes in the opening stanza ("cl<u>ean</u> and inbetw<u>ee</u>n", "peaceful out of br<u>ea</u>th d<u>ea</u>th") set the stage for defiant puns and cool half-rhymes that trivialise terminal illness ("in constant good tumour") and lethal accidents ("mown down at dawn") as spectacles granting eternal fame.

The youthfulness of tone is sustained through ennobling physical properties ("silver hair") and localities associated with urban cool: "a barber's chair" and the "the Cavern [Club]", where the Beatles played nearly 300 times (Anon 2021). Strong sound patterns, as in the onomatopoeic "bursts" of "hamfisted tommyguns", and cool slang ("give me a short back and insides") ground the fantasy in vibrant youth culture, and offer a stark contrast to the biological age signposted in the opening lines of the three middle sections.

The recklessness with which a violent death in the midst of drama and scandal is actively welcomed links this vision to the very essence of the carnivalesque as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. According to *Rabelais and His World* (1965), cultural expressions of the carnivalesque originated from responses to devastating plague outbreaks during the so-called *Black Death* (1348–50). Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque as a code-switching that erodes established hierarchies not only politically and socio-economically but also linguistically. The plague

> grant[s] the right to use other words, to have another approach to life and to the world. Not only have all conventions been dropped, but all laws "both human and divine" are silenced. Life has been lifted out of its routine, the web of conventions has been torn; all the official hierarchic limits have been swept away. The plague has created its own unique atmosphere that grants both outward and inward rights. Even the most respected man may now wear his 'breeches for headgear'. (Bakhtin 1981, 272–273)

In McGough's playful adaptation of the carnivalesque, the Bakhtinian trigger of the pandemic has been replaced with the life stage most closely associated with death and dying: old age. Serving as shorthand for a life period where death might strike at any moment, the ageing subject becomes the perfect embodiment of a *carpe diem* attitude: a fetish whose readiness to self-sacrifice elevates it beyond the carefully guarded lives of younger generations.

Swapping narratives of long-term suffering with the stage drama of a "youngman's death", the poem effectively displaces the reader's worries and concerns about personally experiencing old age. By offering an escapist vision that invigorates and entertains through irreverent jests, the poem affects the reader through catharsis, inviting them to identify with the ageless action hero whose violent ends lends meaning to his life. A carnivalesque tribute par excellence, the poem effectively displaces worries about the future with fantastic scenarios that eclipse such narratives, inviting readers to establish positive associations with old age.

4. Blurred Chronotopes in Ted Hughes's "Old Age Gets Up" (1979), Margaret Atwood's "A Visit" (1995), and Fleur Adcock's "Mrs Baldwin" (2013)

More recently, poets have not only challenged the tendency to patronise and stigmatise old age, but also the periodizations giving rise to notions of old age. Lyrical pieces by Ted Hughes, Margaret Atwood and Fleur Adcock acknowledge the fluidity of ageing, presenting it as a gradual process rather than as a discrete phase that can be defined and categorised in a systematic manner.

Ted Hughes's "Old Age Gets Up", published in *Earth-Numb* (1979), offers a gentle characterisation of an ageing body awakening and rising in a traditional farmhouse setting, arguably informed by Hughes's experience of living on a farm in Devon. The figure of Old Age appears distinctly human, resembling someone struggling to perform simple tasks after awakening from slumber, as their mind gets entangled in surreal dreamscapes. At the same time, Old Age resembles an allegorical modern-day Chronos whose struggle to muster physical strength and mental focus represents the process of ageing, which is commonly imperceptible to the human eye on a day-to-day basis:

Old Age Gets Up

Stirs its ashes and embers, its burnt sticks

An eye powdered over, half-melted and solid again
Ponders
Ideas that collapse
At the first touch of attention

The light at the window, so square and so same
So full-strong as ever, the window-frame
A scaffold in space, for eyes to lean on

Supporting the body, shaped to its old work
Making small movements in grey air
Numbed from the blurred accident
Of having lived, the fatal, real injury
Under the amnesia

Something tries to save itself – searches
For defences – but words evade
Like flies with their own notions

Old age slowly gets dressed
Heavily dosed with death's night
Sits on the bed's edge

Pulls its pieces together
Loosely tucks in its shirt
Pulls the clouds of star-gas together

Leans on the door-frame, breathing heavily
Creaks toward the bathroom
(Hughes 2003, 545–46)

Meandering between physical manifestations of a farmhouse interior and dream-like associations, the poem appears digressive and fragmented, with its formlessness capturing the fluidity of time. Sustained enjambement decelerates the pace and invites readers to feel the slowness with which "Old Age" gets up and "[s]tirs its ashes". The fragmented syntax disorients and makes readers partake in Old Age's confusion. Strategic line breaks as in the assertion that Old Age "Ponders / Ideas that collapse" mimics the tentative bundling of signifiers into fragile patterns of meaning that cannot be retained. Syntactic ambiguity about the temporal sequence of events (does Old Age ponder and then consider ideas that collapse, or ponder collapsing ideas?) make that state of disorientation palpable, rendering ageing accessible to the reader.

This sense of aimlessness is amplified through a blurring of spatial and temporal settings. Several lines root the poem in early morning routines in a domestic space, as Old Age – still "[h]eavily dosed with death's night" – "[l]oosely tucks in its shirt" and "breathing heavily / Creaks toward the bathroom". Other lines question such a reading, notably the assertion that "[t]he light at the window [is] so square and so same / So full-strong as ever", which raises the possibility that the action is taking place during midday, and that Old Age's perception of time is rather skewed. Some spatial settings are similarly ambiguous. References to a "window-frame" and a "door-frame" reference a familiar domestic setting, yet also resemble portals to otherworldly chronotopes, constituting "scaffold[s] in space" that offer glimpses of "clouds of star-gas".

That sense of disorientation is partially explained by the reference to "amnesia" in the middle of the poem, which suggests that Old Age is a patient struggling with sense perception and cognition. The unreliability of sensory and cognitive faculties also erodes a sense of Self. Feeling "[n]umbed from the blurred accident / Of having lived", the voice becomes detached from the physical body, and assumes an outside perspective questioning their degree of agency. Only after countless digressions does Old Age regain the ability to "[s]i[t] on the bed's edge", "tuc[k] in its shirt", and "[c]rea[k] toward the bathroom". The slow transition from a dream-like universe to a realistic setting is effectively captured through the image of Old Age's "lean[ing] on the door-frame", signalling a lingering at the threshold separating interior and exterior worlds. The same sense of lingering is conveyed through the metaphor of Old Age "pull[ing] its pieces together", which expresses a conscious effort to counteract a fragmentation of the Self as well as an attempt to regain physical control of the body.

The realism of the final two lines showing Old Age lurch to the bathroom re-establishes a sense of normalcy similar to the ways in which Jenny Joseph interrupts her wild daydreaming by reminding herself that "now we must have clothes that keep us dry / And pay our rent and not swear in the street". However, here the shift from a largely fantastic, internalised world to a realistic setting does not expose oppressive social norms but highlights the difficulties of articulating the process of ageing through language. This ineffability is effectively captured in the lines "Something tries to save itself – searches – but words evade", which likens Old Age to a dementia patient struggling to retain language. As a nameless individual who has lost their sense of identity, Old Age has become a "[s]omething", an entity that embodies the elusive nature of ageing itself. Defying stable signification, Old Age struggles to "[p]ull its pieces together", and offers mere discourse rather than a coherent story. Ageing, the poem suggests, is too fluid and complex a process to be described in a linear, structured manner. The same point is mimicked through a frame that opens with a fragment – the title doubles as the first line – and closes on an incomplete clause, thus mimicking the elusiveness of the process which Old Age embodies.

Margaret Atwood's "A Visit" (1995) offers a similar view on old age through the speaker's visit to an amnesia patient who can still engage in verbal communication yet regularly lapses into an inner world beyond reach for the visitor:

> Gone are the days
> when you could walk on water.
> When you could walk.
>
> The days are gone.
> Only one day remains,
> the one you're in.
>
> The memory is no friend.
> It can only tell you
> what you no longer have:
>
> a left hand you can use,
> two feet that walk.
> All the brain's gadgets.

Hello, hello.
The one hand that still works
grips, won't let go.

That is not a train.
There is no cricket.
Let's not panic.

Let's talk about axes,
which kinds are good,
the many names of wood.

This is how to build
a house, a boat, a tent.
No use; the toolbox

refuses to reveal its verbs;
the rasp, the plane, the awl,
revert to sullen metal.

Do you recognize anything? I said.
Anything familiar?
Yes, you said. The bed.

Better to watch the stream
that flows across the floor
and is made of sunlight,

the forest made of shadows;
better to watch the fireplace
which is now a beach.
(Atwood 1995, 76)

The weakening of the patient's physical and mental faculties is captured syntactically and semantically through a gradual progression from ordinary conversational language to basic, fragmented speech, followed by impressionistic

vignettes that convey the patient's interior world. The gradual eroding of linguistic competence is effectively mimicked in the opening lines that reduce metaphorical, complex ideas ("Gone are the days / when you could walk on water") to simple and concrete observations ("When you could walk"). A similar reduction occurs with temporal distinctions, as different days collapse into one ("The days are gone. / Only one remains"), invalidating the concept of a 'day', and questioning the meaningfulness of an existence where experiences can only be lived but not recalled.

The mid-section of the poem, starting with "Hello, hello", explores the patient's cognition through a lopsided dialogue, in which the speaker attempts to facilitate a conversation that gradually grinds to a halt. Increasingly simplistic syntax in lines such as "That is not a train. / There is no cricket [on TV]" characterises the patient through absence, signalling the eroding of a shared language. The patient's isolation is further expressed through mixed metaphors such as a "toolbox" that "refuses to reveal its verbs", showing how physical items increasingly become objects decoupled from signification.

The loss of a common language, emphasised in "Do you recognize anything? ... / Yes, ... The bed", feeds into a final section where the speaker accepts the patient's gradual retreat into an inner world that they cannot share through language: "Better to watch the stream / that flows across the floor / ... / better to watch the fireplace / which is now a beach". Phrased as a set of incomplete comparisons (better to watch the fireplace than to do what?) these lines recognize the breakdown of communication, and the inability to fathom the patient's imaginings. The blurring of incompatible spatialities (ward/stream, fireplace/beach) moves the narrative beyond recognisable chronotopes and highlights the idiosyncrasy of their signification.

By exploring ageing through transformative language that progresses from coherent to increasingly incomprehensible, the poem tests the reliability of language and its usefulness for describing ageing in a meaningful way. Instead of an omniscient persona like in Blake's "Ecchoing Green", who describes Old John authoritatively and attributes him archetypal qualities, the speaker in Atwood's poem seems more tentative and communicates through lines that might not only capture the perception of the ageing subject but likewise of the speaker ("The days are gone", "The memory is no friend"). This blurring of distinctions between subject (speaker) and object (patient), outward perception and inward journey erodes conventional parameters of old age, which is not viewed

as a stable category but as part of a process which may be approximated through metaphorical language, yet ultimately remains elusive to the outside observer.

This blurring of subject and object is further developed in Fleur Adcock's "Mrs Baldwin", where the speaker shifts from a humorous external character-isation of old age to a poignant description of ageing as lived experience, thus showing how stereotypes of old age and the process of ageing are interlinked:

> And then there's the one about the old woman
> who very apologetically asks the way
> to Church Lane, adding 'I ought to know:
> I've lived there since the war'. So you go with her.
>
> This comes with variations, usually leading
> (via a list of demented ancestors)
> to calculations of how much time you've got
> before you're asking the way to your own house.
>
> But it's not so often that you find the one
> about how, whenever you hear of someone
> diagnosed with cancer, you have to hide
> that muffled pang that clutched you, at fifteen,
> when you saw Pauline Edwards holding hands
> with the boy from the Social Club you'd always
> fancied.
> (Adcock 2013, 26)

The poem's three-partite structure explores the speaker's gradual acceptance of ageing through distinct phases, from dismissing ageing as a comical and strange phenomenon affecting other people to fearing how it might affect the speaker herself to finally acknowledging how it shapes her own life. The opening joke "about the old woman" asking for directions concludes not with laughter but with the unexpected addendum "So you go with her", suggesting understanding and care rather than belittlement and detachment.

These connotations of loyalty and understanding are strengthened in the following section, where the same interaction is represented as routine ("This comes with variations"), making the speaker wonder about "how much time

you've go / before you're asking the way to your own house". At this stage the old woman and the speaker have become doubles: ageing individuals in need of support. The speaker's generic phrasing when wondering "how much time *you've* got" (rather than "*I've* got") blurs that distinction, and invites the speaker to recognise themselves as individuals prone to the same process of ageing at some point in their lives.

The final section ties an emotional bond between fearing an age-related condition (cancer) on the one hand and painful emotive hurt on the other. Like in the preceding poems by Hughes and Atwood, Adcock's speaker blurs chronotopes as the narrative shifts from humorous anecdote ("not so often that you find the one / about...") to personal confession ("to hide that muffled pang"). The temporal framework likewise transitions from a timeless present associated with repeatedly hearing the same anecdote to a deeply personal memory rooted in the past ("at fifteen / when you saw Pauline Edwards holding hands / with the boy ... you'd always / fancied") whose repeated recall aligns the speaker with the old woman introduced at the outset.

As in the previous poems, the blurring of storyworlds and temporalities becomes shorthand for ageing, which is once again defined as a shift in cognition and the ability to recall. Much like the old woman in the opening joke who blurs distinctions between an objectively verifiable external world and her memories, the speaker connects a narrative she hears (of cancer) with a poignant memory of unrequited love, suggesting that she struggles to separate the two against her will. By pairing the physical sensation of pain triggered by the narrative with the preceding stories on ageing, the poem includes the speaker among ageing subjects, acknowledging a shared participation in the process. By personifying ageing through a highly sensitive individual remembering mental hurt many decades later, the poem also validates ageing as a process that is an integral part of the human condition. By being able to identify with the speaker, the reader is encouraged not as a stereotypical condition to be resisted at all costs, but as a trajectory that has significance and meaning.

5. Conclusion

As the previous discussion has shown, modern poets have repeatedly challenged archetypal notions of old age as a phase to be feared or repressed, promoting the idea of ageing as a process that is to be acknowledged by each and every

individual. The carnivalesque visions by Jenny Joseph and Roger McGough entangle old age with childhood pranks and counterculture, presenting the ageing body as the archetypal fetish that eludes social control. Ted Hughes, Margaret Atwood and Fleur Adcock challenge widespread chronotopes from the inside by attempting to construct and imagine the voices of increasingly voiceless ageing subjects. By blurring external and internal worlds, the reader gains insight into the perception of the ageing object, and is invited to view themself as equally subject to the process of ageing.

A key vehicle these poets use to articulate their vision is the mixing of chronotopes and temporalities. The ageing subject is not so much a passive figure observing the young (like in Blake's "Ecchoing Green") than an agent experiencing life through their consciousness and imagination. Even in an uncommunicative state (beyond the reach of the observer), the ageing subject is humanised and dignified, offering the reader a point of identification. This re-coding of ageing is accompanied by a gentle humour that unites speaker, characters and the reader, creating a common emotive bond that fills the gap left by a lack of coherent signification. The recipe for seeking meaning in age, in the words of Roger McGough, is to be "73 and in constant good tumour". As a mode that plays on ambiguity, humour emerges as a particularly successful means to describe emotional responses to ageing, a process which due to its complexity largely eludes human perception and representation.

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