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**PUTTING IT DOWN TO EXPERIENCE:
AGEING AND THE SUBJECT IN SARTRE, MUNRO AND COETZEE**

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This article will consider the kind of experience represented by old age, and whether we learn through this experience, or whether it falls outside our capacity or inclination to theorise and understand. It will look at ageing, and in particular ageing for women, through the lens of Sartrean philosophy – in relation to Sartre’s scepticism about gaining knowledge or character through simply living longer, and in relation to his position (endorsed by Simone de Beauvoir) that the body is no more than a necessary obstacle that might hamper our efforts to grasp the world (especially if we are women). In the light of the reflections on ageing and gender in Sartre and Beauvoir’s thought, it will use Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s model of the ‘midlife progress narrative’ to consider experience, knowledge and character in female ageing in the fiction of Alice Munro (‘Lichen’ [1985] and ‘Hold Me Fast, Don’t Let Me Pass’ [1988]) and J. M. Coetzee (Elizabeth Costello [1999]).

experience; ageing; gender; subjectivity; body; fiction; narrative; realism; genre; Sartre; Beauvoir; Gullette; Munro; Coetzee

Introduction: The Two Faces of Experience

The current enquiry takes off from Elaine Marks’s thought-provoking 1986 piece on the ageing body in Simone de Beauvoir’s late writing, ‘Transgressing the (In)cont(in)ent Boundaries: The Body in Decline’. It develops Marks’s idea that ageing is often perceived and presented as (an) unmediated ‘experience’ not conducive to theorisation or even analysis. Advanced old age can and does often function, as Kathleen Woodward has argued, as an ‘other’ to symbolisation, a kind of Lacanian Real: ‘the body at the limit of its life is the bedrock of the real, in Lacanian terms’ (1991: 19). Marks reorients this argument, however, in considering it explicitly in terms of gender. She suggests that the experience of ageing might offer the male subject an insight into the way in which society constructs the feminine at any age – as passively determined by biology (1986: 192). Beauvoir herself – despite her ground-breaking critique in *The Second Sex* (1949) of the ideological basis for sexual discrimination – reproduces Jean Paul Sartre’s argument that women are inescapably associated with the material, their bodies an obstacle to transcendence and to symbolisation. The ageing woman becomes in this way doubly disenfranchised by her association with bodily materiality – an argument made by Susan Sontag in her influential essay, ‘The Double Standard of Ageing’, in 1972. Women are also seen to age more quickly: menopause is, as Beauvoir (1977: 27) has argued, ‘unique in the ageing process,’ a marker of age at a ‘comparatively early’ stage. In this way the female experience of midlife, as well as advanced old age, can foreground a biological identity which is taken to define women in the abstract but about which social discourse is strangely silent in the particular. The

alignment of female identity with the body, in short, is a pervasive one in society, culture and theory, at once underpinning the female experience of ageing, and reducing the identity of the older woman to this untheorisable experience.

The term 'experience' is also used in a more positive sense in age-related contexts, of course: to denote an accumulation of practical wisdom over time. Helen Small in her study of old age, *The Long Life*, cites numerous thinkers in support of the idea that age brings gains as well as losses. Plato does not see it as inevitable that we acquire 'wisdom and assured true conviction' over time, but if we do, it is most likely to happen 'on the verge of old age' (653a; cited in Small, 2007: 220). The Roman Cato is more confident in asserting that 'thought, character and judgement grow stronger with experience' (cited in Small, 2007: 220). Time itself, in the terminology of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1990: 457), is experienced as a permanent acquisition, such that 'in old age a man is still in contact with his youth'. Furthermore, as Small (2007: 89) argues, our lives do not just consist in the accumulation of experience over time, but also accrue their meaning retrospectively over the course of time. This construction of experience holds the promise that it might translate into wisdom or superior ways of living. Experience in this sense, out of which knowledge, skills and judgement are seen to grow, is a consolation for the perceived miseries of ageing and gives value to this life stage.

Is there any relationship between these two apparently antithetical forms of experience? Might our faith in learning from experience even conceal a faint trace of the unmediated, unreachable sense of experience first posited, in that the ways of thinking and living that we learn in this way are seen to come 'directly' from life, and thus be immune to potentially distorting social or ideological frameworks? Further to this last possibility, the limit situation of old age itself might represent a privileged form of experience in its remoteness from idealist thought, its very disturbance of definitions of life and personhood. Theodor Adorno reads Aristotle as viewing the 'temporal boundedness of human lives' (Small, 2007: 180) as an intellectual limit to transcendentalism: 'a special imperative to reflecting on the boundedness of "the sensible, empirical world"' (Adorno, 2000: 20, cited in Small, 2007: 180). For Adorno (2000: 17), even Plato cultivates a more Aristotelian perspective towards the end of his life, placing greater importance on 'direct experience' and the 'scattered, the merely existent'. These metaphysical arguments remain in the background of the current discussion, which asks more prosaic questions about the experience of ageing over time, and the epistemological rewards that it may or may not deliver, and does so explicitly in relation to female ageing. It does, however, keep centrally in play the idea that we might as we age be compelled to pay attention less to the transcendent Platonic Idea and more to the contingency of bodily life.

I will consider here the insights felt to inhere in advanced old age, insights about the boundedness of the 'sensible empirical world' and our 'merely existent' place within it, in relation to two literary treatments of female ageing. I will argue that, for the women of Alice Munro and J. M. Coetzee, ageing in midlife (and what might be called the 'early old age' of Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello) represents an experience that resists theorisation and eludes the cultural imaginary just as advanced old age has often been thought to do. The sensible and 'merely existent' as encountered in female experiences of ageing are recuperated in these writers' work, however, and given positive philosophical and psychological capital.

Munro's stories 'Lichen', first published in 1985, and 'Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass', from 1988, and Coetzee's 1999 novel *Elizabeth Costello*, all explore the insights offered by the experience of ageing and its distance from the cultural symbolic, even when these do not translate into recognisable forms of 'wisdom' or rational sense.

The discussion begins by exploring the assault on the idea of learning through experience in the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, and the basis of this critique in a model of consciousness that surpasses bodily existence. I will posit the alternative view, put forward by Ernest Becker (2011: 216ff) in relation to the experience of midlife, that the Sartrean male invests too heavily in the symbolic, failing to sufficiently 'mourn [his] creatureliness', and therefore is ill-equipped to deal with ageing when it arrives. Becker's account is consistent with Sartre's in seeing women as more closely tied throughout their life to what Becker calls the 'organic', but reclaims this closeness as allowing for a more robust accommodation with older age. I will take in a literary account of what such an accommodation – and indeed positive learning from age – in midlife might look like: Margaret Morganroth Gullette's modelling of the midlife progress narrative in *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*. Finally, I will consider the literary case studies of Munro and Coetzee in which, I will argue, the benefits and costs of the female experience of ageing are weighed in a more nuanced manner than is permitted to these philosophical accounts. Literature, Small (2007: 95) has argued, has a more elaborate vocabulary for narrative and its interpretation than philosophy; it might, then, also offer a richer picture of the stages of a narrative lifecourse and the double-edged nature of the experience that one accumulates over this subjective span of time.

Sartre, Beauvoir and the 'Necessary Obstacle' of the Body

The philosophical frame for the remainder of this article returns us to Marks's essay on Beauvoir and the existentialist take on the tension between the transcendent and the 'merely existent' – the latter referred to by Martin Heidegger and by Sartre as 'facticity'. Just as Adorno suggests that Plato's thinking (and by extension his own) might be influenced by his ageing, Sartre comes to concede that the relationship between the existential self (and its projects) and the body may change abruptly with the advent of old age. This is not, however, a position that sits easily within his overall philosophy, a system of thought in which ageing finds little place. Sartre said as much in an interview, conducted and published by Beauvoir in the last years of his life and quoted by Marks, in which he all but dismisses the idea of ageing as an experience beyond the fact of physical change:

There's one thing I've always thought – I spoke about it to some extent in *La Nausée* – and that is the idea that you don't have experience, that you don't grow older. The slow accumulation of events and experience that gradually create a character is one of the myths of the late nineteenth century and of empiricism. I don't think it really exists. I don't have a life, an experience, behind me that I can turn into maxims, formulae, ways of living. So since I don't believe that I possess experience, I am the same close on seventy as I was at thirty, as long as my body functions.

(Beauvoir, 1984: 324)

If we look to the treatment of these ideas in *La Nausée*, we indeed see Sartre's narrator, Roquentin, make a sustained attack on the claims to wisdom-through-experience of the decorated older gentlemen in the portraits that hang in the Bouville museum. The attitudes of the bourgeois middle-aged professionals around him in the bars and cafés seem to the narrator similarly frozen and contrived:

about forty, they baptize their stubborn little ideas and a few proverbs with the name of Experience, they begin to imitate slot machines; put a coin in the slot on the left and out come some anecdotes wrapped in silver paper; put a coin in the slot on the right and you get precious pieces of advice which stick to your teeth like soft caramels.

(Sartre, 2000: 101)

This consecration of experience is, for Roquentin, the 'last defence' against the death that approaches such men. Its claim, however, is imbued with this death. Doctor Rogé, who seems to epitomise experience and authority, 'has only to look in a mirror' to see 'the corpse he is going to become' (103). That, Roquentin continues, 'is what their experience amounts to, that's why I have told myself so often that it smells of death'. For Sartre, the embodied, time-bound nature of experience undoes its claims to instructiveness. The subject encounters the world through the body, but this body and its temporal existence should be 'surpassed', in Sartre's term (1986: 326), by the consciousness of the subject, even while being indistinguishable from this subject. The experience he so scorns, furthermore, can only be consolidated and rendered intelligible to others in retrospect, and as such it represents the end of activity, desire, and truly creative intellectual thought, all of which for Sartre are oriented towards and exist in relation to the future.

The experience of physical ageing is one, then, that Sartre's subject must also 'surpass'. For Sartre, one has a choice towards one's bodily condition: 'I make of it the necessary obstacle of my being, and I cannot be crippled [*infirm*] without choosing myself as crippled' (1986: 326, 328).¹ Yet, as Christina Howells (2009: 136) has argued, death is an integral part of human facticity, and if this facticity includes our body, what Sartre calls our 'physiological structure' (1986: 328), it must encompass ageing as well as being in the prime of life. Sartre is engaged in a sustained denial of this aspect of our existence, writing 'there is no place for death in the being which is for-itself' (1986: 540), and leaving the decline of both body and consciousness in old age, and its curb on our freedom to choose, largely unacknowledged.

The psychic benefits of this failure of the imagination, as Howells calls it, are evident in Sartre's suggestion, in the interview with Beauvoir, that he is 'the same at close to seventy as thirty': he has, it is implied, the same relationship of freedom towards the world – towards his projects in it and the future in which they will unfold – as he did as a young man. Yet there is a critical condition attached to such freedom. It inheres only '*as long as his*

¹ As Christina Howells has pointed out, Hazel Barnes translates '*infirm*' as 'crippled' but, in Howells' words, 'the sense is broader in French and includes, for example, *the infirmity of old age*' (2009: 137; my emphasis).

body functions' (Beauvoir, 1984: 324; emphasis mine). And, as Beauvoir observes without compunction in her subsequent questions to Sartre, this body is not now functioning very well. So where does this leave him? If he finds no lessons of experience engraved upon his 'corpse's face', and he cannot perforce have the same relationship to the future in the face of an encroaching death, for what does an old man count?

It is, at the very least, interesting to note the radically diminished expectations that Sartre has for the end of life, and the cliff-edge disjunction between his thoughts about this period and his dismissal in the same interview of age as a factor in his life and thought up until this moment. Sartre is comfortable with having fewer and different expectations for old age than other stages of life. He is also commendably consistent, as subsequent exchanges in Beauvoir's interview attest, in applying such a scaling back of expectations to his own life as well as to lives in the abstract. He faces his own undignified physical decline with a sanguinity that both baffles and pains Beauvoir. Beauvoir reports that on being asked about the loss of control entailed in incontinence, for instance, Sartre 'answered with a smile, "When you're old, you can't expect too much, your claims have to be modest"' (1984: 33-34). Beauvoir remarks: 'I was touched by his simplicity and by this moderation, so new in him; and at the same time his lack of aggressiveness and his resignation wounded me.' She undoubtedly felt both admiration for Sartre's stoicism and genuine sadness about what it betokened. It might also be possible, however, to discern a certain chagrin at the ease with which Sartre seems to accept the suddenness of the change in his outlook from ageless to completely defined by age. Beauvoir, by contrast, has struggled as a woman with the body as painful obstacle to freedom for most of her life, following the precepts of Sartre's philosophy – and her own.

Beauvoir's very personal commentary on this interview with Sartre opens up questions at the heart of his philosophy, and reflects the uneasy relationship she has in her own work with his thinking. Sartre's conception of the conscious being is that it moves 'toward some future possibility', in Constance Mui's terms (2009: 88), in a fluid and ongoing process of self-definition. It can have no fixed identity, something that frees it in an ontological sense. The self is always embodied – 'I am my body' in so far as it is the 'centre of reference through which the world is ... revealed to me' (Sartre, 1986: 304). Yet my 'body-for-me, as the most authentic dimension of my body, is always "the neglected" and the "passed by in silence" while I engage in the pursuit of my projects' (330). The body, as has been seen, is not an object for our consciousness but transcended 'toward my project in hand'. This account of being has profound and contradictory implications for women, however, in so far as their conscious being is deemed – throughout their lives – more immanent and repetitive, less able to surpass their bodies. Beauvoir herself attests to how this plays out in *The Second Sex*: the constant, painful, repetitive experiences of the body in menstruation, childbirth and menopause prevent it from being ignored; it becomes an obstacle which restricts what Beauvoir, after Sartre, calls a woman's 'grasp on the world' (1975: 34; see Mui, 2009: 90). As Beauvoir puts it, 'woman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself ... an obscure, alien thing' (1975: 29). Sartre has ignored his body in so far as it might have intruded upon his grasp of the world or the clear-eyed pursuit of his projects for the majority of his life; when he can ignore it no longer, he quietly and calmly steps away from the existential project. For Beauvoir, who has argued

that women can only attain freedom and combat the confining demands of nature, aggravated by patriarchal society, by violently resisting their bodies, this insouciance might well have been received as wounding.

Yet, as Mui argues, a feminist thinker might turn this view of female immanence around without simply rejecting Sartre and Beauvoir's account out of hand (though they may find plenty to critique). Elaine Marks sees Sartre in advanced old age come to an understanding of his facticity that has long been available to women his age, who are more constrained by their bodies, but also perhaps more aware of the embodied nature of their existence. Mui reads this same process of realisation as negative for men – and (relatively) positive for women. She cites Becker's thinking on mid-life crises in *The Denial of Death* (1973), which holds that those who have led lives that have been too symbolic, too sublimated into culture – that is to say, at the risk of being reductive, men – have not kept the symbolic and organic aspects of their life in balance or engaged sufficiently in a process of 'mourning their creatureliness' (Becker, 2011: 216ff). They find, consequently, that ageing, when it comes, can overwhelm them (215-16). It follows that women, who have (if we follow Sartre's account) come to terms with the 'organic' much earlier, in their repeated experience of bodily facticity through menstruation, childbirth and menopause, might, as Mui (2009: 92) argues, deal better with the 'terrifying reality of finitude'. Mui is not necessarily fully endorsing this position, using it instead in a wider and more balanced discussion of the value of female bodily experience and its connection with consciousness, but she does use it as a possible argument against a transcendent form of male embodiment as the ideal for a 'balanced, resourceful existence' (92). Sartre and Beauvoir themselves, of course, seem to present the opposite scenario in their personal attitudes, Sartre appearing to deal better with the sudden onset of subjective ageing than Beauvoir, who never comes to terms with it over the long period in which she mourns her lost youth. Mui's model of a 'crisis' in male ageing is a familiar one, however, in relation to which Sartre can seem like the exception. In what follows, I will consider how far Mui's suggestion might hold up in literary representations of women in midlife and later life. Do they, as women, better understand and accommodate the inevitable decline that organic life imposes, and how far is this understanding valued on a personal and a social level? And how might we weigh the epistemological and psychological gains of such experience against the constraints that female ageing imposes in the social sphere?

Alice Munro and the Experience of Midlife

Literary critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette has, like Becker, refuted the inevitability of midlife crisis, seeking in literature, as Mui seeks in philosophy, for what might make for a resourceful existence in midlife. She argues in her study of American and British fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, *Safe At Last in the Middle Years*, for a new subgenre that might provide an answer: the 'progress narrative of the middle years' (1988: ii), as exemplified by the work of Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, Anne Tyler and John Updike. Gullette does not connect psychically successful ageing to gender, as Mui, through Becker, tentatively does. Gullette's work offers, however, some reflections on the ways in which ageing and narrative are linked in literary fiction that might usefully frame the discussion that follows. As she observes, '[a]ll narrative fiction tells us what it is like to become "older", if only a day or a

few hours older' (30). The midlife progress narrative, in particular, a 'coinvention', as she puts it, with 'psychosocial and narrative features' (xi), emerges as a means to encompass the experience of a post-war generation who had greater social and sexual confidence, greater parity between the sexes, greater affluence, and more resources for finding within themselves the way to effect a cure or recovery from the ills that had befallen them. The guiding belief of these narratives is that people can 'grow over the course of their lifespan' in ways that make it possible for them to 'write' their own narratives of recovery and development (xii). If Sartre challenges the idea that one grows into a certain character through one's experience, Gullette takes on a different – and arguably opposing – construction of 'character': the idea that one's nature gets fixed at a very early age. This essentialist view of self is, however, one with which Sartre would have no more truck than the idea that one acquires an identity over time and through empirical experience. Gullette's self-determining characters, indeed, are shaped by a positive liberal version of existential freedom. Their lives are contingent and surprising – responsive to the 'flick of luck, the waning of suffering, the irruption of energy for a task' (xxiv). Learning does not perform 'the pivotal dramatic role it could once play' (35) in realist fiction or *Bildungsroman*. Nonetheless, for Gullette, ageing can also constitute progressing, and result in coming to 'own' one's particular 'plot of recovery or mastery' (xxv).

Alice Munro, starting to write at the same time as Gullette's exemplars, but principally in the form of the short story, returns frequently to the question of what sort of experience might accrue in midlife, and how far it might assist her protagonists in weathering, if not mastering, the contingent events of their lives. The protagonist of her 1988 short story, 'Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass', ends by asking herself what makes a man happy, and concluding that it must be 'something quite different' (105) than for women. Any evaluation of midlife in Munro's fiction must acknowledge the central part played by gender in determining the experience, and the different value that society accords to age in men and women at this life stage. Without directly addressing the factors that might underlie this, Munro observes the persistent double standards that operate in relation to men and women's ageing, and the different paths that they are expected to take to happiness and fulfilment. Men are routinely assumed to find their full capacity in midlife, whereas this is felt to be much less certain for women entering, enduring or passing beyond the menopause. Women are sometimes granted a measure of confidence, energy or effectiveness after they emerge from the change of life, freed from the most insistent of the reminders of their bodily immanence (briefly, at least, before old age brings the body to the fore again). This energy is generally seen as being at the expense of romantic desire and bodily attractiveness, however, an either/or that is often presented as a necessity in stories of midlife from Beauvoir to Munro herself. The accommodation with the 'organic' that Mui suggests might be the woman's means of coping in older age is repositioned in Munro's stories as hard-won at best. Gullette finds a trenchant refutation of the idea of inexorable and inevitable female decline in the works she discusses; Munro's middle-aged women also decline to decline, but they feel keenly the cost of living in a culture which associates femininity too completely with youth, and with a passively sexualised body, and they struggle – as Beauvoir does – against the internalisation of such beliefs.

Munro's story explores just this dilemma. Hazel, her middle-aged protagonist, has become estranged in some undefined way from her husband in growing away from the 'pale, squeaky-voiced girl' he brings home from the dance. She has 'muscles that came from gardening and hiking and cross-country skiing', activities that had 'dried and wrinkled and roughened her skin'; at some point she had 'stopped bothering about it' (Munro, 1990: 82). Munro appears to present this as a liberation from an identity determined by the male gaze: 'She broke open the shell of her increasingly doubtful and expensive prettiness; she got out'. As the passage proceeds, however, the free indirect discourse becomes more palpable, and Hazel's mastery over her own narrative becomes increasingly effortful:

She has said and thought that there came a time when she had to take hold of her life, and she has urged the same course on others. She urges action, exercise direction.

(Munro, 1990: 83).

This accelerated story of self-mastery seems almost a parody of Gullette's narratives of recovery. Hazel's internal recovery programme is developed in response to a breakdown she had in her thirties, after which – to effect this physical and psychological cure – she had nonetheless to leave 'some part of herself behind' (83), a part that had to do with her husband Jack. The import of this part of the story is ambiguous. There is an implication that this recovery had involved a renunciation of sexual activity or sexual feeling ('she didn't think any abandonment had to be permanent' [83]) but it is not clear that this is the case. It is no clearer that a renunciation of the sexuality associated with the pale girl Jack first courts would be altogether a bad thing if it allowed for the emergence of a strong and active woman with a similarly strong and active body. There is a disturbing impression, however, here and elsewhere in Munro's writing, that – at least for these women at this time – self-reliance and self-cure seemed to happen at the expense of the received idea of femininity, and that this made these processes prejudicial to happy sexual relations.

An earlier story, 'Lichen' (1985), also suggests a certain incompatibility – in the world that Munro's protagonists inhabit, at least – between remaining feminine and practising a range of kinds of self-realisation as an active, knowledgeable and independent middle-aged woman. Here the female protagonist, Stella, also in midlife and also single (though separated rather than widowed), is initially seen through the eyes of her estranged husband David, who returns annually to visit his former father-in-law in his nursing home. The narrative opens with David's thoughts about Stella's physical appearance: she, like Hazel, has renounced the work of 'prettiness', something that is taken by David as an affront to the male sex. Stella appears to him in his scathing interior voice as a 'short, fat ... troll', and we can discern the obscure feeling of threat that her failure to play by the social rules governing female appearance provokes in him: 'there is nothing underneath these clothes, as far as he can see, to support or restrain any part of her' (Munro, 1987: 32). Again, the narrative voice shifts to an even more explicit voicing of David's perspective, as he projects his own hostility onto Stella: she, in being so careless about her appearance, is for the self-absorbed David doing it 'on purpose ... the sort of woman who has to come bursting out of the female

envelope at this age'; aligning herself, he concludes somewhat hysterically, with the '[m]an-haters' (32). David comes across as the weaker party in this instance, but the story demonstrates that the cultural discourse of ageing reinforces – in ways subtle and unsubtle – this imperative towards the preservation of 'expensive prettiness' in women.

Munro presents her female characters in this story against the backdrop of the commodified images of the lifecourse that define the 'female envelope'. Stella herself observes Catherine, David's current girlfriend, with a mixture of sympathy and jealous contempt. Catherine, nearing forty, is on the cusp of a transition from youth to middle age. Stella reflects on the romantic image that she offers, sitting on a groyne on the beach, hair and impractical skirt flying in the wind:

She might be advertising something, Stella thinks – either something very intimate, and potentially disgusting [we assume sanitary products], or something truly respectable and truly splendid, like life insurance.

(Munro, 1987: 39)

With different distance from the camera, perhaps, different lighting, a different angle, Catherine could either be a young woman at the peak of her childbearing potential, or a youthful older woman, advertising the products of the next life stage (life insurance). In either case, her existence (and her projected acts of consumption) are unimaginatively determined by her biology. There is an ironic tone to Stella's inner monologue, in the characterising of the 'truly respectable' and perhaps the 'disgusting' too, but she has also internalised these normative images and – like Beauvoir – cannot help but measure herself against them.

Despite the ambivalent outlook of such stories, and the fact that they offer snapshots of her characters' sensibilities and narratives rather than the slow embedded development to which Gullette alludes, it is instructive to examine Hazel and Stella in relation to Gullette's ideas about the stories we tell ourselves about our own lives. Gullette writes about the maladaptive valuing of a 'tragic/ironic' attitude in traditional psychoanalytic views of identity, a stance also taken in many narrative treatments of midlife. Accounts are rife that emphasise 'how much of life is irreversible, and how unavoidable pain and suffering are' (Gullette, 1988: xxv). Newer fiction might, Gullette suggests, model new psychodynamic perspectives whereby the subject rejects an ironic narrative of self-deprecation, of their life story as a 'catalogue of losses', and realises how far they themselves have been responsible for this construction of their story, a story that has been an 'inhibitor of change' (xxv). Hazel in Munro's 'Hold Me Fast' presents the converse story, of course: the narrative of her self-determined recovery. This recovery is far from complete, however: the form it takes precludes the 'long process', covering 'a lot of psychic ground', which Gullette sees as necessary to the narrative of cure, seeming instead to drive itself forward on willpower alone and by virtue of suppressing inconvenient feelings and costs. Hazel's brisk dismissal of her own qualms seems also to speak more deeply to the inadequate nature of her version of this cure: 'Anyway, it can't be helped' (Munro, 1990: 83).

Stella's attitude in 'Lichen' to her own stage of life initially seems more accepting than that of Hazel. She is not 'writing [her] memoirs', as she jokingly (and threateningly) suggests to David that she might be, but investigating the history of the local lighthouse (Munro, 1987: 35). It is unclear whether she still needs to complete a process of self-cure, to rid herself of the lingering, painful traces of attachment to David, a deeply unpleasant man, or whether she has already made her recovery, tolerating these painful visits – in which he compulsively shares with her the details of his latest sexual conquest – purely for the sake of her elderly father, but generally feeling content and fulfilled outside of them. By comparison with Hazel, and in Gullette's terms, however, she is also more explicitly ironic and self-deprecating about her lifestyle and her own efforts to find purpose and ward off the potential emptiness of this time of life. The supper club she goes to sets themselves challenges to test their ingenuity: 'always testing something' (35), she observes ruefully of the nature of her present activities, their challenge both effortful and somewhat contrived. She is also cursed with a damaging level of insight into David's mind, discerning his embarrassment at being observed by a young woman giving Stella a spontaneous embrace: 'Never mind, David. I could be your sister. You could be comforting your sister. *Older sister*' (54). Her Cassandra-like powers also seem to extend to predicting that the photograph of his naked girlfriend that David leaves at her house, deliberately or otherwise, will fade in the sunlight of the window sill it sits on, and become as grey as the lichen she pretends to think it is in the first place. The rather contrived narrative shape (and title) that this image of lichen gives to the story seems self-conscious on Munro's part: the transparency of Stella's deceit in pretending that she sees lichen in David's photograph is matched by the hollowness of the 'knowledge' that is arbitrarily created when the photograph fades to this very appearance. These forms of insight do not translate into any possibility of positive action, comfort, or even virtue, more often than not affording a bitter jibe at her ex-husband from a position of powerlessness.

For David, Stella's experience and the knowledge it bestows cause feelings of threat and aversion akin to those occasioned by her expanding body:

All his ordinary and extraordinary life – even some things it was unlikely she knew about – seemed stored up in her. He could never feel any lightness, any secret and victorious expansion, with a woman who knew so much. She was bloated with all she knew.

(Munro, 1987: 54)

What, however, is Stella's relationship to this knowledge? She relentlessly exposes the dynamic of their relationship, even when this could be seen to humiliate her more than it shames the insensitive David. This candour is refreshing and in some respects impressive, but there is a poignant gap between the social and psychological capital this knowledge should represent and the emotional damage that it does to her. Knowledge is attached to powerlessness, to Pyrrhic victories of rhetoric, to making the best of things. It often represents only the diluting of pleasure for the other party rather than improving life for herself.

Yet at a deeper level than this rhetorical one, Stella is the non-ironic character in this story. Gullette's categories direct us to a level of psychic health beneath the emotions playing out on the story's surface. Stella is quietly satisfied – with and for herself – with the good meals she cooks, the bright colours that she wears, and the charm that she can exercise among the nursing home residents she visits. When her ingenuity is tested, she responds resourcefully. David is the character who seeks to be the tragic hero. He plays out the trajectory of a short-lived love affair over and over again. He sets himself, in Gullette's terms, 'unrealizable standards' (1988: xxv), even in sexual folly, experiencing a crisis when his very young new girlfriend is out when he calls. He knows that he will become bored with the newly acquired girlfriend, as he is with his current one, and as he was with Stella – and perhaps also knows that he is growing too old to have long in this game. (Stella is genuinely surprised – for almost the only time in the story – at the news that he is dyeing his hair.) Yet he cannot escape from this cyclical pattern of behaviour. He is also the one most prone to nostalgia, despite on the face of it having a more satisfying (or at least more exciting) present, suggesting that he is less open to the direction in which his life is heading and more likely to look back. On Gullette's model, he is the one for whom life will never correspond to expectation and will therefore invite an ironic narrative of disappointment. It is perhaps no accident that he reads novels, while Stella writes history.

Stella holds off the self-evaluation, the moral life review, which old age might seem to invite. She steps around the question of whether her life is or has been 'good':

'You have a good life here,' Catherine says.
'I have a fine life. Yes.'

(Munro, 1987: 44)

The slippage between 'good' and 'fine' is a telling one. In not overstating either the positives or the negatives of her life, she gives way neither to painful fantasy nor to a narrative of inexorable decline. Her claims are as modest as those of Sartre. Munro herself is under no illusions, however, about the gap between Stella's story and a narrative of progress. Realism in Munro's stories operates under both its habitual meanings. Munro works as a writer in the literary genre in which qualities are always seen in context, constrained by the social circumstances in which they emerge – this the very definition of experience for feminist thinker Teresa de Lauretis (1984: 159). Munro is also, however, grimly realistic in her writing about the likelihood that neither experience, nor knowledge, nor endurance, worthy as they are in themselves, will necessarily prevail over more aggressive tendencies: over ambitions or desires – the narrative modes of the young. Most insistently in her narratives, women are still unable to connect knowledge with social or emotional power, caught by their circumstances in a trap in which self-reliance and femininity seem to be incompatible qualities, bodies active or beautiful but not both. Munro's fiction therefore positions itself at some distance from classic realist narrative conventions. She deals with resolutely recognisable experience, and is nothing if not knowing, but she is ultimately distrustful of the realist narratives of epistemological and emotional progress – the midlife alternatives to *Bildungsromane* – as she is of tragic irony. She is doubtful, in short, of the promise that the

characters that age builds are necessarily the most adaptive ones – although they are often the ones with most integrity.²

Elizabeth Costello, Realism, and the ‘Real’ of Experience

In watching Munro temper Gullette’s idea of midlife progress as much as she does, presenting the obstacles to self-realisation – bodily and otherwise – imposed on women as they age, we may feel that the outlook for a positive model of experience is somewhat bleak. Vigorous and active and insightful as Munro’s women are, their ability to surpass the facts of their bodily existence is constrained much in the same way as Beauvoir’s in comparison to their male counterparts. To find a literary example of an ageing woman who makes a more successful accommodation between knowledge and bodily facticity, we need the example of an older woman still. The protagonist of J. M. Coetzee’s 1999 novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, is no longer vigorous; she is not tanned or healthy or strong. Neither is she expensively pretty, or passive, or feminine, however. She finds her identity at two ends of the same spectrum: she is learned, a successful highbrow novelist, and she is animal, a subject who does not, in Becker’s (2011: 216ff) terms, mourn her creatureliness so much as identify with it completely. Coetzee’s novel departs from generic expectations as it flouts expectations about gender identity. It explores the possible link between ageing and wisdom not in terms of cumulative experience, as a narrative of progress might, but in the immediate experience of bodily materiality in the period of old age itself.

Elizabeth Costello has achieved public success and acclaim as an author, but has also entered a phase of her life in which her public activity takes place against a private sphere in which she is seen to need to rest, to conserve, to recharge: negative ‘activities’ that barely break the surface of the narrative. The early part of the novel deals with her public appearances, managed by the adult son who accompanies her, and from whose perspective we see her. In the gaps in the narrative, which describes itself as ‘skipping’ over swathes of the characters’ lived time (‘unless certain scenes are skipped over we will be here all afternoon’ [Coetzee, 2004: 16], the narrator observes at one moment), the reader glimpses Costello’s need for rest, her fatigue, her unspoken pain and weariness, as well as an encroaching emotional indifference. The experience of ageing is the unimportant narrative background happening in the interstices of her (public) life, but it is also the guarantee of the text’s realism, and so its claims to its epistemological significance. The first chapter is entitled ‘Realism’, and Coetzee in the guise of his narrator comments self-consciously about this use of what Roland Barthes (2006) called the ‘reality effect’: ‘The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism’ (4). In the next line, however, these details are connected to the promise of meaning: ‘Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves.’

What is the connection between such particulars of the ageing experience and the ideas the novel puts forward? Coetzee’s late fiction marks a turn in his thinking about bodily experience, it has been argued, that puts ageing into a different relation with insight and

² Heike Hartung (2015) has looked at the way in which age functions in classic *Bildungsromane*, arguing that it already often disrupts the expectation of learning and progress there (especially when it manifests as illness), an argument I find persuasive but do not have the space to engage with here.

truth than it might have had early in his work. Pieter Vermeulen has discussed Coetzee's early writing in terms consistent with Sartre's conception of transcendent being. He equates Coetzee's position and interests in his early fiction with 'French theory', especially that influenced by Alexandre Kojève, the Hegelian philosopher credited with shaping Sartre's philosophical thinking. He sees Coetzee explore the role of 'nothingness' in the conception of human consciousness in his first novels, associating their metafictional narrative structures with the 'emptiness greedy for content' (Vermeulen, 2010: 278) that characterises conscious being in Kojève's account – and later that of Sartre. Coetzee's 'meticulously self-reflexive' early novels model in narrative terms the free nature of the consciousness 'empty *qua* itself', as Mui (2009: 89) summarises Sartre's thinking, the 'nihilitating For-itself' (Sartre, 1986: 309) that surpasses the body. In later works such as *Elizabeth Costello*, however, the brute facticity of suffering – in the ageing human body, in the animals who are tortured in the course of factory farming – is a Johnsonian refutation of the transcendence of the subject.³ Coetzee himself spoke in an interview at this later period about the body in pain in terms which could be a direct rebuttal of Sartre: the suffering body, he said, 'is not "that which is not" and the proof that it is is the pain it feels' (1992: 248). Bodily facticity attains a primacy in his later work, a primacy that undermines the subject's claims to transcendence or symbolic life, but correspondingly elevates the claims of this very facticity to philosophical and ethical importance.

Related to this faith in the instructiveness of immediate bodily experience is the resistance in Coetzee's novel to turning experience into what Sartre called 'maxims, formulae' (Beauvoir, 1984: 324). Costello makes speeches to convey her ideas, but her thinking in these speeches does not transcend or stand outside subjective experience; the two are inextricably linked. As Vermeulen argues, Costello does not 'present us with an argument about the proper treatment of animals, but asks us to participate in her struggle with the issue' (2010: 324). The whole discussion over whether a human can think themselves into the life of a bat (Coetzee, 2004: 77) is framed by the early section in which we see Costello through the eyes of her son, and witness the efforts, but also the limits of his emotional and imaginative identification ('What is the truth of his mother? He does not know, and at the deepest level he does not want to know' [30]), a suggestive juxtaposition. Like the response of David to Stella in Munro's 'Lichen', the male son in Coetzee's novel feels disturbed, if not disgusted, by the evidence of his mother's ageing body. In this case, however, he respects her separate subjectivity and these feelings are not experienced as an affront to his own selfhood. Full imaginative identification is not necessary for respect and sympathy with suffering. Nonetheless, Costello's age connects her to the ideas about the ethics of human treatment of animals (and the human treatment of other humans) through her capacity to suffer and to experience the world through the alien form of the body that is ageing. Her age is also, crucially, seen to play a role in her disregard for convention, popularity, and the elevation of rationality of thought over all other considerations. In Costello, qualities that might popularly seem to characterise decline or undesirable aspects

³ Samuel Johnson famously refuted Bishop Berkeley's idea of non-existence of matter, the idea that the universe is 'merely ideal', in 1763 by kicking a stone and declaring: 'I refute it *thus*' (Boswell, 1935: I, 471).

of ageing – intransigence, eccentricity, unapologetic position-taking – are reconceived as a possible path to truth.

Finally, it can be argued that the unusual form of Coetzee's book – the first part realist novel (albeit a self-conscious one), the second part largely accounts of other written words (Costello's public lectures and people's responses), and the third part a kind of fable – is related to the fact that a normative narrative trajectory cannot represent the period of old age he presents, and what he wants to say about it. Learning and lived experience are decoupled – the ideas in the book are presented via Costello's speeches, the themes of which organise distinct sections of Coetzee's novel: 'The Lives of Animals', 'The Problem of Evil' – but also intimately linked through the intersection of these themes with the experiences of Costello's bodily existence. Coetzee recommits to the primacy of bodily existence in this work in a way that distances him from Sartre's thinking, but he is no more convinced by an empirical account of the building of character than Sartre is. Or at least he sidesteps the realist narrative form that such an account would invite. Costello talks in one of her speeches about Franz Kafka's short story, 'A Report to an Academy' (1917), told from the point of view of an ape who has learnt to act like a human. The last part of the novel itself subsequently turns into a Kafkaesque fable in which Costello is required to account for herself in a mysterious tribunal in order to pass through the gate to freedom. Coetzee reverses the direction of Kafka's narrative in that Costello refuses to attest to the higher principles or learning that she might be expected to marshal to represent her value as a human being – her beliefs, or what she has learned from life. She offers a pledge to the immediate, present, sensory world only: the song of frogs in the Australian bush her testament of faith. She is articulate and intelligent but in her last years commits to an animal existence rather than one characterised by abstraction or erudition.

Costello resembles Kafka's ape in one respect, however: just as he can no longer offer an account of his past life as an ape, so completely has he learned to dissemble as a human, she cannot connect her past self to her present one. She can remember experience, but the experience she remembers is sensory and unmediated, as has been seen, and falls outside of the framework of a narrative identity. This is not presented as a loss of faculties (as might be identified with old age and cognitive impairment) but rather an authentic statement about the impossibility of reducing experience to 'character'. Coetzee dismantles the promise of realism if that promise is to be a progressive linear process of learning from experience, a sentimental or unsentimental education. Costello knows less than the locals at their siesta. She figures herself as the old man of Yeats's poem 'Sailing to Byzantium', but in her case she values not the art or wisdom of the sages who live outside of sensual life, but rather the example of the 'young in one another's arms' (Coetzee, 2004: 222). Costello comments to this end: 'We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No *I*, no *you* is more fundamental than any other' (221). Ageing is not, then, seen in this treatment as representing the sum of one's existence, the point of completion of one's narrative self. Instead, if it offers any wisdom, it may occasion a new understanding of this existence in terms of what Yeats might call its sensual music, and the essential dependency of one human being on another. That Costello has embraced her creatureliness allows her to embrace her finitude. It is, then, received as an affirmation rather than the intended dismissal when the guard says to her that 'we see people like you all the time' (225).

It is no accident that gender has not featured significantly in this account of Coetzee's novel. Elizabeth Costello's gender is not irrelevant to the story, becoming significant especially in terms of her relationship with her son and his complex and ambivalent feelings towards his mother. In terms of my argument, however, it is conspicuous by its absence from the foreground. Costello's bodily experience is not connected to her biological destiny as a woman. She flouts social expectations in disregarding her appearance – 'the blue costume, the greasy hair' (Coetzee, 2004: 4) – but it is more significant that she does this in relation to her persona as a public figure, ahead of a public engagement, than that she does this as a woman (of whom particular concern over her appearance might be expected). It is easier, no doubt, for Coetzee largely to sideline her gender because she is a post-menopausal woman, a circumstance pertinent given my concerns here, but it is of more interest to me still that her bodily materiality is a universal fact. This fact relates to the ideas the novel presents in two distinct ways. The first is that it is the guarantee that Costello's ideas come from a human subject who exists in the world and has to negotiate that world on behalf of those ideas—an argument in line with Vermeulen's position that we see her struggle with her beliefs rather than act as a mouthpiece for them. The second, as has been seen, is that the insistence of her bodily experience as an ageing woman is linked, subtly but perceptibly, to her understanding of the facts of the existence of the animals whose rights she champions. Whatever we feel as readers about the ideas that the novel discusses, this represents a striking reconsideration of the untheorisable experience of old age, one which sees it yield insights on its own terms and without being reinserted into a linear narrative of learning or discovery.

Conclusion

In concluding, then, I want to argue that the narrative of progress is qualified by gender in Munro's work, and by genre in Coetzee's. I have examined Sontag's double standard of ageing through one philosophical lens, that of Sartre and Beauvoir, noting the pervasive way in which it operates to deny women and older people transcendent subjectivity, and to qualify the possibilities they have to translate experience into socially recognised knowledge or agency. I have considered the possibility that an existence more attuned to its own facticity might make it easier to accommodate the more insistent demands of the ageing body when they arrive. Munro's female characters palpably learn from their experience of ageing, but find that it is hard to mobilise this learning in the nexus of social circumstances in which they find themselves. Coetzee's narrative, conversely, does not present a realist story of learning over time, but the immediate experience of advanced age provides an instructive context within which to think about the rights of animals and what it is that gives meaning to the lives of all living beings. Women in these works of literary fiction find that they recognise and accept these experiences of ageing, in other words, while their male counterparts recoil from them. These experiences do not, however, sit easily within the symbolic order in which these women have to live, and there is a cost to moving forward as older people in a culture where any narrative of progress rests on self-reliance rather than a recognition of interdependence. Neither does either writer deal in tragic irony, however. The lived experience of ageing, these literary fictions show, does not fit easily into the formulae of literary narrative, or the ways of living that society recognises as progress or

discovery, but can nonetheless constitute knowledge grounded in, but not limited to, the body.

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