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"Countering Ageism in Nancy Huston's Dolce agonia and Michèle Ouimet's L'heure mauve"

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Article abstract

Dans son étude sur les effets néfastes de l'âgisme (2017), Margaret Morganroth Gullette souligne le fait que la marginalisation constitue une de ses conséquences les plus troublantes, soutenant que, comparé au racisme, au sexisme et à l'homophobie, "ageism is the least censured, the most acceptable and unnoticed of the cruel prejudices" (xiii 2017). Les femmes en particulier ont été affectées de manière négative par les idées dévalorisantes qui résultent des intersections entre le vieillissement et le genre. Depuis les années 1990, cependant, un corpus croissant d'analyses académiques et d'oeuvres de fiction et auto/biographiques a commencé à contester les clichés qui dénigrent les personnes âgées. Dolce Agonia de Nancy Huston et L'heure mauve de Michèle Ouimet, par exemple, mettent en avant diverses réponses à l'expérience du vieillissement, de la maladie et de la perte. La structure polyphonique de ces romans crée un dialogue complexe sur des sujets importants liés au vieillissement et les deux textes relèvent le défi lancé par Lynne Segal "[to] think again, think more imaginatively, about ageing" (2).

"Countering Ageism in Nancy Huston's *Dolce agonia* and Michèle Ouimet's *L'heure mauve*"

Susan Ireland and Patrice Proulx

In her illuminating 2017 study of the nefarious effects of ageism, Margaret Morganroth Gullette forcefully brings to light the fact that marginalization is one of its most disturbing consequences, positing that, in comparison with racism, sexism, and transphobia, "ageism is the least censured, the most acceptable and unnoticed of the cruel prejudices" (xiii). Other pioneering scholars have drawn attention to specific issues that contribute to the invisibility of the ageing population, such as the prevalence of negative stereotypes which devalue the elderly and associate old age with physical and psychological decline and the "youthful structure of the look" which diminishes the elderly by reducing them to "the prejudicial category of old age" (Woodward, "Performing Age" 164). Women in particular have been adversely affected by the disparaging notions that have resulted from the intersections of ageing and gender. As early as 1972, Susan Sontag pointed to the "double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity" (31), while in 2013 Elaine Showalter affirmed, "It's not easy to come out as an old person, especially as an old woman" (xi).

Since the emergence of the field of Age Studies in the 1990s, however, a steadily growing corpus of academic analyses and of fictional and auto/biographical works has begun to contest the ageist assumptions which demean the elderly. Nancy Huston's *Dolce agonia* (2001) and Michèle Ouimet's *L'heure mauve* (2017), two novels which exemplify this trend, attest to the burgeoning interest in ageing as a literary theme. In *Dolce agonia*, which portrays a group of long-time friends who celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday together in New England, the alternation of the characters' present-day interactions with chapters in italics that foretell their destinies and the nature of their deaths enables Huston to foreground diverse responses to the experience of ageing, ill health, and loss. Similarly, Ouimet's text, which is set in a retirement home in Montreal, gives voice to many of the residents and uses a series of flashbacks recounting their earlier lives in order to highlight their current attitudes to old age, from their fear of cognitive deterioration to the sense of dispossession caused by their increasing loss of autonomy and the relinquishing of their professional lives. The polyphonic narrative structure of the two works creates a multifaceted dialogue on a range of important topics related to the process of ageing and encourages the reader to reflect on the implications of growing old in a culture that very often marginalizes the elderly. As such, these thought-provoking novels make a significant contribution to ongoing conversations about the devaluation of the elderly and thus take up Lynne Segal's challenge to us all to "think again, think more imaginatively, about ageing" (2).

Dolce agonia

Interestingly, in her discussion of the paucity of constructive portrayals of old age, Sally Chivers notes that she has found "a larger number of defiant characterizations in recent Canadian production than anywhere else" (xx). Both Huston, who was born to an anglophone family in Alberta,[1] and the Québécoise Ouimet could be included alongside the authors identified by Chivers in that they "promote diverse new depictions of female ageing from the perspective of unquestionably, chronologically old women" (xvi). Huston

1 Huston relocated to France in 1973 and has explicitly linked her decision to write in French to the fact that her mother abandoned her and her family when she was only six years old.

has privileged an exploration of the thematics of ageing throughout her oeuvre and has addressed this topic in both fictional and non-fictional works such as *Les Variations Goldberg* (1981), *La virevolte* (1994), *Professeurs de désespoir* (2004), *Lignes de faille* (2006), and *Carnets de l'incarnation* (2016). Indeed, as Kate Averis argues, Huston's "innovative approach to writing female ageing challenges the historical tendency toward the reproduction of cultural narratives that depict ageing women in a very limited range of roles" (326). Rather than reproduce cliched views of older female characters in *Dolce agonia*, the author highlights a broad spectrum of potential reactions to growing older by weaving together the voices of a range of characters who represent different stages of "elderhood"[2] and by juxtaposing them with the chapters in italics in which the narrator (God) relates the future and the circumstances of the death of each protagonist. At the same time, the fact that the characters reflect on various periods of their lives, evoking, for example, their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, foregrounds the notion of an age continuum that includes childhood and adolescence, as well as middle and old age. Huston calls attention to these "complex layerings of identity" (Segal 4) in her volume of essays entitled *Nord perdu*, remarking in "Orientation" that "En fait nous sommes tous multiples, ne serait-ce que pour cette raison-là: que nous avons été enfants, puis adolescents; ne le sommes plus; le sommes encore" (19). The polyphonic framework of *Dolce agonia* also effectively enables the author to counter the harmful dichotomies which permeate cultural constructions of ageing, most notably the opposition between the dominant narrative of decline and that of positive ageing. These polarized perspectives are neatly summarized by Segal in her observation that "we find two narratives of ageing, expressing the standard binary logic: stories of progress and stories of decline; of ageing well and ageing badly" (17). In contrast, the depiction of the characters in *Dolce agonia* in relation to their past, present, and future selves serves to refute the idea of simple dichotomies and proposes instead a more complex picture of later life.

In many respects, *Dolce agonia* evokes in fictional form what Betty Friedan calls "the two faces of age,"[3] the coexistence of corporeal decline and continuing psychological growth with its "quiet ripening of mental and spiritual capacities" (86). The novel directly addresses the physical effects of ageing, and none of the protagonists subscribe to harmful notions of "positive ageing," characterized by Chivers as what occurs when one clings to "an impossible, and undesirable, continued youthfulness" (xxv). Of the group of thirteen gathered at Sean Farrell's house, all but two are middle-aged or older, with the youngest a toddler (Hal Jr.) and the eldest (Aron) in his late eighties. From the outset, references to the bodily attributes of age frame the narrator's presentation of the characters. The first description of Katie, for instance, mentions her "crinière blanche" and her "visage ridé" (27), and readers soon learn that Brian suffers from tinnitus, Aron wears a hearing aid, Sean experiences shortness of breath due to lung cancer, and several guests take their medications discretely at the table. As the dinner progresses, we are often reminded of these signs of ageing, with several extended passages highlighting the "marks of time" visible on the characters' bodies.[4] Derek, for example, thinks of the transformations caused by the inexorable passing of time—"les cheveux blanchissent, la peau se ride [...] les pieds se déforment [...] les articulations se bloquent" (242)—while Rachel interprets the manifestations of age inscribed on her friends' faces as evidence of their respective life experiences: "Les sourcils de Katie: froncés, plissés comme un rideau de souci permanent sur ses yeux. Mes joues à moi: ridées, hachurées par l'angoisse. Les profonds sillons

2 The term "elderhood" is the title of Louise Aronson's *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life*" (2019).
3 This expression constitutes the title of one of the chapters in Friedan's *The Fountain of Age* (1993).
4 "The Marks of Time" is the title of an essay by Nancy Miller in *Figuring Age*, pp. 3-19.

horizontaux dans le front de Derek: résultat, dirait-on, de plusieurs décennies de tourment ininterrompu" (178).

Furthermore, the protagonists on various occasions draw attention to a much remarked upon facet of ageing, the impression of a discontinuity between one's external appearance and one's sense of self, a disjuncture often referred to as the mask of ageing.[5] For his part, Sean explicitly conjures up images of masking and disguise when reflecting on this distressing phenomenon: "La vieillesse ressemble toujours à un déguisement [...] on est persuadé que les gens finiront par éclater de rire et arracher leur masque, révélant leur vrai visage de jeune en dessous" (71). More importantly, however, the dinner guests show their compassion for one another through their ability to disregard corporeal inscriptions of age and see their friends' inner selves: "ils effacent ces marques avec magnanimité, les oublient, parviennent à se faufiler derrière elles, ou plutôt en dessous, à l'intérieur, jusqu'à l'essence et à l'âme" (121).

Huston's portrayal of twenty-three-year-old Chloé, the only young adult present at the dinner, creates a striking contrast with the older friends' ability to see the whole person. Chloé's dehumanizing gaze, which simplistically reduces them to their ageing bodies, represents society's "distaste for ageing" (Woodward, *Figuring Age* xiii), and she could be said to embody what Gullette terms the "hostile age gaze" (12), an "age glimpse" which is "quick, summary, and dismissive" (14). Indeed, when encountering Sean's friends for the first time, she disparagingly labels them as "ces vieux schnocks" (175) and views the octogenarian Aron as "[r]épugnant, avec ses mains tordues, sa peau tachée, son cou ridé de poulet" (369-70). The deleterious effects of this age gaze are evident virtually every time Chloé is mentioned in the novel, thus foregrounding the ways in which social constructions of age constantly diminish those regarded as elderly and suggesting the need to adopt new figurations. The other guests are painfully aware that Chloé will not look beyond the surface and take the time to appreciate the rich layers of their identities, and they therefore find themselves in the unsettling position described by Laure Adler in *La voyageuse de nuit* (2020), her non-fictional work on ageing, where she affirms that "dans le regard des autres mon sort est scellé [...] j'ai tous les âges à l'intérieur de moi et, sur mon visage, celui que les autres me donnent" (17-18). Even before Chloé and her middle-aged husband Hal arrive at Sean's house, the protagonists are ill at ease as they anticipate that she will categorize them solely as "des vieux" (120), and, for this reason, they resent the fact that "on vient de les condamner à exposer, malgré eux, leur corps ce soir: leur corps décati, objectivé, jugé" (121). In this sense, Chloé serves as a mirror for the older guests, and several passages emphasize their apprehension and feelings of vulnerability in her presence. In a particularly salient example, Aron views himself through her eyes, thinking regretfully that she would be "révulsée par le contact de [sa] peau jaune parcheminée et squameuse" (205).

In addition to illuminating the physical realities of growing old, the novel acknowledges that losses of different kinds—"subtractions from selfhood," as Gullette calls them (xix)—constitute an inevitable aspect of ageing. In *Dolce agonia*, Aron echoes this sentiment when he laments the absence of physical contact experienced by so many in later life—"Plus d'amour de peau pour nous autres vieillards, plus de contact ni de caresses" (205). Similarly, Sean reflects on the disappearance of friends, noting that as time passes, and especially in later life, "on en gagne et on en perd mais surtout on en perd et on en perd encore" (140). Over the course of the text, the protagonists attest to several other types of loss that have profoundly affected them, including the deaths of family members,

5 Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick, for example, define the mask of ageing as "the inability of the body to adequately represent the inner self" (7).

the disintegration of memory, and the passing of previous stages of life they found particularly satisfying, such as motherhood. Patrizia, for example, lost her lover Daniela to brain cancer, she and Katie had sons who died prematurely, and two of the characters' mothers, as well as Hal Junior and one of Rachel's neighbors, are depicted as suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Although most of the characters are dealing with ill health or general physical decline, the novel does not dwell exclusively on this face of ageing, but also proposes "new and different patterns of purpose and intimacy" (Friedan 70), suggesting that, for many, later life may be "a state of becoming, not merely an ending" (72). Indeed, a majority of the protagonists continue to develop and seek out new paths. Rachel and Charles, for instance, find lasting satisfaction in their professional lives, and both constitute compelling examples of the synchronicity of the two faces of age, as teaching continues to provide them with a rewarding sense of purpose. Highly regarded by her students and colleagues, Rachel is still giving lectures on philosophy to packed auditoriums at age eighty-three, and the narrator describes her as a "*monument national*," asserting that "[*s*]*on esprit reste vif et sa langue, agile*" (188). Charles, too, takes great pleasure in his work as an accomplished professor at Tulane University and is the author of a number of well-received books on interracial relationships, as well as a posthumously published volume of poetry. In his case, the narrator explicitly directs readers' attention to the positive side of ageing, noting that, "*malgré tout, c'est avec plaisir qu'il s'installait chaque jour à son bureau, préparait ses cours, consultait des livres de poésie et d'histoire*" (112). Two other protagonists, Patrizia and Aron, discover fulfilment in new types of work later in life. When Patrizia takes up a secretarial position at the local university, she experiences a feeling of vitality and "épanouissement" (47) which is visible to those around her. Likewise, after Aron retires from his post as professor of social anthropology in South Africa and moves to the United States, he opens a bakery in his late sixties, finding enjoyment in making bagels and Jewish pastries. Finally, Sean embodies the combination of creativity and physical decline as he continues to write poetry throughout his illness, with his prize-winning, posthumously published volume—notably entitled *Dolce agonia*—being his most successful.

The second side of ageing can also be seen in the close friendships and family relationships that the characters develop over time. Two of the couples in particular represent the companionship and steadfast affection provided by a long, loving marriage. Brian's simple gesture of putting his arm around his wife Beth and drawing her towards him in his sleep, for instance, conveys the tenderness and comfort afforded by "la bonne chaleur de cette chair si familière" (479). Likewise, Katie and Leo, who are characterized by the narrator as "*plus très fringants mais néanmoins émouvants dans leur attachement réciproque*" (428), attest to the same association of longevity and intimacy and demonstrate the sustaining force of continuing love and desire. Similar references to the coexistence of age and vitality appear in passages evoking Beth's enjoyment of her interactions with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Described in one of the forward-looking narrative passages as "*pétulante et incroyablement vieille*" (396), she is presented as a model of dynamic ageing, and the strength of her family ties brings sustenance after her extended struggle with bulimia. In the same way, the narrator highlights the importance of supportive friendships throughout life, but most critically in older age. In this regard, Daniela and Patrizia's relationship serves to illustrate female love and closeness, while Rachel, who stays by Sean's side during the final stages of his illness, is associated with loyal support and the enduring bonds of a longstanding friendship. Rachel is also linked to the theme of intergenerational friendship, and the connections she establishes give her another sense of purpose in addition to her teaching. The protagonists' diverse trajectories, which exemplify Huston's belief that "on est… un individu en transformation perpétuelle" (*Professeurs* 64), thus serve to present ageing as a state of becoming, and *Dolce agonia* constitutes an effective counterweight to the one-sided decline narrative.

L'heure mauve

Although markedly different in tone from *Dolce agonia*, Ouimet's polemical *L'heure mauve*[6] again provides multiple perspectives on ageing and examines a series of pivotal issues related to later life and the care of the elderly. The fact that events take place in a retirement home located in the upscale Montreal neighborhood of Outremont, a "résidence snob" (12) ironically named Le Bel Âge, enables the author to address the impact of such homes on sense of self and to examine the role played by social class in elder care.[7] As in *Dolce agonia*, the protagonists' names serve as titles for the majority of the chapters, and the alternation between the present of the narrative and the chapters relating various periods of the characters' pasts creates a detailed picture of their trajectories and allows readers to compare their thoughts on ageing at different times of their lives. Similarly, the epigraph, taken from Simone de Beauvoir's *La vieillesse*, focuses attention on the potential divergence between stereotypical views of older people and their actual needs and desires. Indeed, the passage cited argues that if the elderly express the same feelings as the young, they are deemed scandalous, noting especially that "chez eux [les vieillards], l'amour, la jalousie semblent odieux, la sexualité répugnante, la violence dérisoire [...] . Avant tout on réclame d'eux la sérénité." Many of the descriptions of the residents of Le Bel Âge—principally retired professionals—strongly intimate that these protagonists would qualify as scandalous in de Beauvoir's sense of the term, and Ouimet's account of their life stories calls on the reader to consider the adverse consequences of society's marginalization of the elderly.

In particular, *L'heure mauve* is structured around the distinction between ageing well and ageing badly, between the "ill-derly" and the "well-derly," as Harry Moody calls them (qtd. in Gullette xvi). This division is conveyed for the most part through the opposition between those characterized as the "bien portants" and those who need more care and are derogatorily labeled the "atteints" (41) by the healthier residents. The "bien portants," embodied primarily by the residents who dine together at "la prestigieuse table des six" (21), could be said to represent "encore adulthood," the period between "traditional careers and childrearing and old age" (Moen 5). Associated with independence and good health, these residents have a dismissive, condescending attitude towards those using walkers and wheelchairs or suffering from dementia, their disdain often expressed in their body language, as when "Le groupe des six les regarde en levant les yeux au ciel" (58). Former judge Pierre, "le boss des six" (55), gives voice to the most virulent objections to the presence of those with disabilities and leads a campaign to have them excluded from the dining room and from group activities, justifying his position with the argument that "Ils sont confus, agressifs, ils mangent avec des bavettes [...] On est dans une résidence privée, pas dans un CHSLD!" (66)[8]. As such, the novel portrays in fictional form "the idea that later life can be divided into a 'third' age and a 'fourth age'" (Gilleard and Higgs 135).[9] For Gilleard and Higgs, the notion of a fourth age "helps distance longer lives and later lifestyles from the abjection of old age and at the same time it intensifies the horror with

6 Ouimet is a prize-winning journalist who spent nearly thirty years at *La Presse*, covering wars and natural disasters in places such as Afghanistan, Syria, Rwanda, Mali, and Haiti. In addition to *L'heure mauve*, she is also the author of an earlier novel (*La promesse* 2014) and two works of non-fiction.

7 Lucie Robitaille, the owner and director of Le Bel Âge, recognizes the incongruity of the name, but kept it as the home already had an excellent reputation when she purchased it.

8 Lucie worked in a Centre d'hébergement et de soins de longue durée (CHSLD) for three decades before resigning—demoralized by how the residents were treated, she no longer wanted to fight "une machine qui ne respectait pas les vieux" (63).

9 Here, Gilleard and Higgs are referring to Peter Laslett's notion of third and fourth ages of life in *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (1989).

which 'real' old age is viewed" (128), a distancing evident in Pierre's description of himself as "une personne âgée, pas un vieux" (74), for example. Likewise, certain residents' use of the term "les atteints" "[makes] of the other an abject class [and] creates an artificial distance between those who are deemed flawed and those who are deemed fit" (Gilleard and Higgs 140). Pierre's antipathy towards the infirm thus signals his desire to put off the moment when he will enter "real" old age and make the transition from the "vieillesse choyée" of the relatively healthy to "l'autre… celle qui le terrorise" (74).

The well-derly/ill-derly dichotomy is further emblematized by the spatial demarcation between the second floor, where the more disabled live, and the other parts of the residence, and a striking image suggesting abjection and stigmatization underscores this division: "Un mur de Berlin sépare le deuxième du reste de la résidence, comme si le deuxième était contaminé, ou, pire, contagieux" (130). Much of the plot revolves around recently arrived resident Jacqueline Laflamme's fight to prevent the more infirm from being segregated from the others, an arrangement which would oblige them to have their meals on the second floor and engage in separate activities, therefore reinforcing their marginalization. A former journalist, Jacqueline deploys all of the tools of her trade to advance her cause, provocatively creating an in-house newspaper, *Le Flambeau*, and titling her first article "L'apartheid au temps des vieux" (223). Her controversial efforts to reverse the newly instituted segregation at Le Bel Âge, which she views as a form of discrimination, also seek to counter the dehumanization of the second-floor residents. As she argues, "Pourquoi les empêcher de vivre avec les autres? Ils n'ont pas la lèpre ou le choléra, ils sont vieux, c'est tout" (284). Similarly, the use of the pejorative term "mouroir" (138) to describe Jacqueline's perception of the ambiance of the second floor strengthens the theme of abjection through its evocation of death and deterioration.[10] When the issue of discrimination at Le Bel Âge is taken up by the media at large, the attention surrounding it focuses on the overall quality of elder care in assisted-living facilities, and the novel calls for better government oversight.[11]

On the other side of the conflict, when Pierre is confined to a wheelchair after suffering a second stroke, he finds himself living alongside those he had mercilessly belittled, a progression that ironically underscores the idea of a dreaded transition into the fourth age. As the narrator tells us, "Pierre est devenu tout ce qu'il détestait, un homme diminué qui mange avec une bavette" (356).[12] In this fashion, he in his turn becomes the object of the judgment of the other residents and experiences "the uneven distribution of power that marks the projection of the healthy gaze onto the diseased body" (Tanner 12). In the final description of Pierre having dinner at his usual table, the fact that his presence changes the mood of the other diners implicitly evokes this visual dynamics and reinforces the idea that he has joined the ranks of those disdained by others.

In addition to Pierre, several other protagonists attempt to delay the transition from their "vieillesse choyée" to advanced old age. Jacqueline's former colleague and lover Marc, for instance, begins a relationship with a thirty-five-year-old woman and fathers a child at age sixty-three, prompting Jacqueline to highlight the existence of a double standard of ageing, as she asks rhetorically, "Qui voudrait d'une maîtresse de soixante-trois ans?" (252).[13] Likewise, Raymond unexpectedly leaves his wife Françoise for a much

10 Jean Anderson remarks of "mouroirs," "These institutions are generally seen as hostile environments which, rather than nurturing and supporting their 'résidants', instead promote physical and mental decline by placing more importance on routine and financial efficiency than on catering to individual needs" (345).

11 In this context, reference is made to "la tragédie de l'Isle-Verte" (282), an incident in which thirty-two residents of a nursing home near Montreal died or were presumed dead following a fire on January 23, 2014.

12 In *Dolce agonia*, a description of the time that the writer Hal spends in a nursing home conveys the same sense of abjection and infantilization as in *L'heure mauve*.

13 Huston, too, points to the unfairness of this double standard in *Dolce agonia* when Beth observes critically, "on entend toujours parler des hommes âgés qui sortent avec des femmes plus jeunes, jamais l'inverse" (288).

younger woman (Marie-Eve) after twenty-eight years, and Françoise's characterization of herself as having been "abandonnée comme une vieille guenille par un mari qui refusait de vieillir" (23) explicitly associates her husband's desertion with a denial of ageing. However, when Raymond becomes disabled after a stroke, it is Françoise who assumes the challenging role of caregiver, sacrificing her own chance for happiness with a new partner in the process. In contrast, Marie-Eve's look of disgust when she first sees Raymond in his hospital bed recalls Chloé's age gaze in *Dolce agonia*,[14] and her healthy gaze on his ailing body again illustrates "the visual dynamics of bodily objectification" (Tanner 4).

Georges, a former professor of African history and an inveterate womanizer who is described as physically fit and handsome in his seventies, embodies de Beauvoir's notion of "scandalous" behavior for someone in his age group. Still very active, he is "en guerre contre la vieillesse" (216) and obsessively engages in sport as his primary means of warding off the corporeal signs of ageing, using exercise as a "fontaine de Jouvence" (216), and thereby creating an interesting contrast with Friedan's notion of the fountain of age, a concept which focuses on continuing intellectual and emotional growth rather than the pursuit of youth. Although the seductive Georges has had many younger mistresses, he ultimately develops a loving relationship with a woman in her late seventies (Françoise) when he is in his eighties. The portrayal of their relationship in the chapter entitled "L'amour au temps des vieux" highlights the beauty of Françoise's ageing body—"Dieu qu'elle est belle" (181)—and rejects the commonly held idea that the sexuality of the elderly is repugnant. In this fashion, the novel, like *Dolce agonia*, suggests that ageing does not necessarily mean living in a "désert affectif" (183), and the narrator underscores the pleasure that this type of intimacy can bring: "Ils se sentaient légers, fous, comme s'ils transgressaient un tabou. Ils caressaient leurs corps vieillis sans voir les rides" (182).[15]

As was the case in *Dolce agonia*, the period of encore adulthood in Ouimet's novel is associated with loss and the search for a new sense of purpose, and all of the types of privation evoked by Ann Burack-Weiss appear in *L'heure mauve*: "Losses of self (cognitive, sensory, physical functioning). Losses of others (siblings, spouses, often children). Losses of role (worker, spouse, friend)" (2). The protagonists' perceived reduction of possibilities and the fear of losing their identity are often conveyed through the characters who have had long, successful careers. The retrospective chapters in particular serve to highlight what has been lost and in what circumstances, as they provide insight into the protagonists' earlier lives and create the impression of an "evaluative backward glance" (DeFalco 23). The chapters recounting Jacqueline's passion for her work as a reporter in Tehran and Peshawar and those narrating Georges' academic career and love of doing research in Africa, for example, effectively point to the significance of "the backwards glance—the identifying freight of a lifetime" (Lively 3). At the same time, other passages draw attention to "the first (or second, or third) flush of downsizing" (Burack-Weiss 20) in the literal and metaphorical senses of the term, and this feeling of dispossession is encapsulated in Georges' question as he prepares to move to Le Bel Âge, "comment caser soixante ans de vie dans un deux et demie? Comment choisir, trier, renoncer?" (324). Pierre expresses the same fear of downsizing, which he experiences as a series of losses, his feeling of diminishment reinforced by the repetition of the expression "moins." As the narrator tells us, "Chaque renoncement effraie Pierre: quitter leur grande maison, se débarrasser de la plupart de leurs livres et de leurs meubles, voyager moins,

14 The age gaze is also evoked when fifty-eight-year-old Jacqueline realizes that her Pakistani interpreter views her "avec dégoût" as an old woman "qui s'obstine à parcourir la planète avec son corps usé et ses cheveux gris" (202).

15 At the same time, like Pierre, Georges is "terrorisé à l'idée de finir au deuxième (184), but he must move there when he begins to suffer from severe memory loss.

vivre moins" (76). Pierre often thinks nostalgically about his "passé glorieux" and "la crainte respectueuse qu'il inspirait aux avocats" (73), while Georges, who used to be viewed as "le grand historien" (34), sees his empty mailbox as a symbol of his loss of prestige.

Furthermore, one of the descriptions of Jacqueline refers explicitly to loss of power, and she shares with Pierre and Georges the fear of becoming what Gullette calls "minor defective characters in someone else's story" (xv). When Jacqueline loses her job after forty-six years, the narrator comments that, "Elle avait perdu son pouvoir, son identité, sa raison d'être [...]. Après avoir été tout, elle était devenue rien" (306). Rather than appreciating what she had thought would be a peaceful life at Le Bel Âge, Jacqueline lacks motivation, asking herself, "Dieu du ciel, tout ce temps. Comment l'occuper?" (306). However, her conflict with Lucie and Pierre over the treatment of the second-floor residents provides her with a new sense of direction and gives her the "dose quotidienne d'adrénaline" (304) that makes her feel alive. Indeed, as Gullette posits, "righteous anger" among the elderly is often a manifestation of "[t]he innate wish to be recognized as persons of equal worth" (195). With its strong emphasis on Jacqueline's anger and Pierre's outrage, *L'heure mauve* consequently brings to the fore the importance of not marginalizing or infantilizing the elderly.

By organizing *Dolce agonia* and *L'heure mauve* around multifaceted conversations about elderhood and by seeking to contest persistent clichés, both Huston and Ouimet respond creatively to Segal's exhortation to think more imaginatively about ageing. The protagonists' diverse responses to growing older create a complex picture of later life, and the two texts thus provide a counterweight to simplistic binaries and stereotypes. As such, they constitute a significant contribution to humanistic gerontology, and their "gestures of resistance" participate in the move to "work toward a kind of narrative repair of our ageist culture" (Bouson 33). Indeed, both authors emphasize the part that literature can play in challenging ageism by providing a springboard for discussions pertaining to a long life. A form of engaged writing, the novels raise critical questions about longevity, senescence, and the ethics of care at a time when the ageing population continues to grow, causing many societies around the world to grapple with the problematics of how best to sustain and advocate for the elderly in their communities.

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