theories and methodologies

Rereading the Future

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I NOTICED THE DYNAMIC RELATION BETWEEN AGE AND NARRATIVE THE SECOND TIME I READ EDITH WHARTON'S *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*. ON MY first experience of reading the novel, as an undergraduate of eighteen, I was engaged by its thwarted love story and saddened by Lily Bart's tragic but honorable end. When I reread the novel in graduate school, however, I was about to turn twenty-nine, the age at which Lily's marriage prospects and high expectations for the future begin to fade. Although Lily is widely admired for her remarkable beauty, readers are alerted in the novel's opening pages to the incipient erosion of that beauty. Even as Lawrence Selden finds his eyes "refreshed" when he catches a glimpse of Lily at Grand Central Station, remarking that "he had never seen her more radiant" (37), he credits this impression to the way her dark hat and veil have temporarily restored "the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing" (38). While Selden silently muses about her age ("There was nothing new about Lily Bart. . . . [H]ad she indeed reached the nine-and-twentieth birthday with which her rivals credited her?" [37–38]), Lily declares that she's "as old as the hills" (38); she perceives that "people are getting tired" of her and saying she "ought to marry" (42).[1] Lily is ambivalent about marriage as her "vocation" (as Selden puts it [43]) but undertakes this quest. By the end of the novel, having lost her social and economic standing and failed to secure a husband—and thereby a future—she puts her affairs in order and overdoses on chloral (43). Her age is certainly not the only factor contributing to her decline: Selden's continuing fascination with Lily affirms that she has remained distractingly attractive (even if, perhaps, "ever so slightly brightened by art" [39]), and the novel attributes her social descent more directly to her financial circumstances than to her age. Nevertheless, the opening scene of *The House of Mirth* emphatically establishes twenty-nine as a precipice over which Lily Bart falls to her doom.

Although I was unlike Lily in any other way, I was, when I reencountered the novel after ten years, ambivalently single. I had been

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twenty-six when I decided to pursue a PhD, and I confidently ignored warnings not only from my grandmother ("The time for school is over; it's time to start a family!") but even from my sister, who predicted that I would end up "lonely and bitter" if I didn't prioritize finding a husband. I ignored them, secure in my knowledge as a feminist that a gratifying life for a woman need not center on marriage and children. Besides, this was the mid-1990s: the popular media was full of stories about advances in reproductive technologies that would append a snooze button to the biological clock.[2]

Disregarding my family's concerns, I left my job and began work toward a PhD. Just a couple of years later, though, as I reread *The House of Mirth* for a graduate seminar, the implications of Lily Bart's age—and mine—suddenly registered differently. I knew I was lucky to be living at a time when women are not financially dependent on men and that I need not say of marriage, as Lily does, "a girl must, a man may if he chooses" (46). But still: as I made my way through the novel, following as each progressively unappealing prospective spouse—and, with him, each diminishing future that Lily imagines for herself—in turn become inaccessible to her, I noticed that the lonely existence my sister had predicted for me took up a place in my imagination. The fate of this character, resonating alongside other cultural messages about the pathology and tragedy of becoming what was once called a spinster, seemed like a warning. Even as I studied feminist readings of Wharton's novel and embarked on writing my own critiques of the objectification and commodification of women—and even as I recognized the multiple trajectories that women's lives could take and argued against narrow, heteronormative models of development and fulfillment—the prospect of being single at thirty and the specter of the lonely, bitter future predicted by my sister haunted me.

In his contribution to this feature, Peter Rabinowitz addresses the evolving age relationship between a reader and revisited characters: as we change over time, he suggests, rereading reveals shifts in our perceptions of characters, as well as in our attitudes about (and perhaps our tolerance for) a text's authorial audience. In addition to exposing changes in our relations to the characters and context of a literary work, rereading also, in the words of Patricia Meyer Spacks, sets up a relationship with "one or more versions of our past selves" (8). Spacks describes her book *On Rereading* (2011) as "an autobiography of thoughts and feelings elicited by novels" that she systematically reread over the course of a year (18). Her reflections throughout the book emphasize the "dynamic tension between stability and change [that] lies at the heart of rereading" (4). This tension arises in the relation not only between the static text and the reader's changing perspective but also between the conflicting trajectories of continuity and change that constitute aging through time. Wendy Lesser identifies a similar tension in *Nothing Remains the Same* (2002), a critical memoir about rereading books she had first encountered when she was young:

> You cannot reread a book from your youth without perceiving it as, among other things, a mirror. Wherever you look in that novel or poem or essay, you will find a little reflected face peering out at you—the face of your own youthful self, the original reader, the person you were when you first read the book. So the material that wells up out of this rereading feels very private, very specific to you. But as you engage in this rereading, you can sense that there are at least two readers, the older one and the younger one. You know there are two of you because you can feel them responding differently to the book. Differently, but not entirely differently: there is a core of experience shared by your two selves (perhaps there are even more than two, if you include all the people you were in the years between the two readings). (4)

The effect of this uncanny encounter, which Spacks describes as a "dynamic tension,"

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Lesser experiences as a form of vertigo. She writes:

> There is something inherently dizzying in the effort to look at a still work of literature from a moving position—that is, from two different points in time. And this vertiginousness seems to be linked, in turn, to our directional sense of time's passage, to the poignancy of the fact that time only goes one way. There is some parallel . . . between that kind of one-wayness and the one-wayness of the relationship between a reader and a book. The characters in a novel can speak to us, but we can't speak to them—just as our younger selves can be heard and understood by our older selves, but not vice versa. (8)

While it's true that time only goes one way, and that we can't speak to our younger selves, I think it's worth attending to the ways our reading selves seek to peer ahead into the future as well as to reach back to the past. My contribution to this discussion about reading over time, then, is to suggest that since narratives (while certainly not directives) can work on the reader's subconscious, mapping possibilities for human experience over time, rereading—particularly rereading with attention to the implications of age—can expose the way reading informs assumptions about age stages and age hierarchies. This practice of age-aware rereading can help disrupt rigid models of cultural life scripts, expand the range of potential futures, and—through the vertiginous encounter with earlier selves and a critical eye on age ideologies—enable a sense of integration rather than alienation over time.

The difference ten years made in my response to Wharton's novel left an impression on me that has guided much of my subsequent academic work on models of age and temporality. I'm particularly interested in how the "struggle against the power of time" that, for Georg Lukács, characterizes the form of the novel can be reframed as a struggle against cultural models for understanding age and experience (122). Lukács contrasts the novel's absorption with time and mortality with the way the earlier epic form "retains nothing of time except the phase of blossoming; fading and dying are left entirely behind" (122). These naturalized images of blossoming and fading are recast by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, a leading voice in age studies, as narratives of progress and decline.[3] As its title suggests, a central point of Gullette's *Aged by Culture* is that age is not merely a matter of chronology or biology but also a function of cultural assumptions that value youth (associated with progress) over older age (associated with decline). In this light, my anxiety upon reencountering Lily Bart at twenty-nine reveals the power of what Gullette calls "decline ideology" and can be seen as an early onset form of what the psychologist Mark Freeman calls "narrative foreclosure."[4] Lily's decline exposes but also, perhaps, reinforces the expectation that a woman's social value inexorably decreases with age. Of course, this aspect of the plot had been central to Wharton's narrative when I first read it in college. However, when I was on the cusp of thirty, a cultural message that might once have subtly resonated was now loudly disruptive, subjecting to increasing pressure each hour I spent trying to advance in the doctoral program rather than dedicating myself to pursuing a partner.

Reencountering the glamorous but tragic Lily Bart—and forcefully confronted by a gap between my feminist ideals and my personal fears—I began to notice something: I was, as a PhD student of literature in the mid-1990s, learning theoretical models for understanding and exposing cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, race, and class. Age, however, was not being similarly theorized as a category of analysis, leaving even a critically engaged reader with few tools with which to counter the age-related expectations and ageist assumptions that pervade cultural narratives. In literary scholarship, I found plenty of work

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on children and adolescents but no courses on age studies more broadly conceived, few volumes of critical approaches to age, and only a handful of conference panels on the subject. It seemed strange that, at a time when humanities scholars were publishing widely on numerous aspects of identity and difference, conceptions of age—the only aspect of identity that universally and inevitably changes over time—were not similarly explored.[5]

As I tried to navigate between the competing, urgent projects of dating and academic research, I began to see anxieties about the social implications of aging as central to the works of the women writers I had come to graduate school to study. The four novels Jean Rhys published in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, each feature a woman at a different decade—from the teens through the forties—who is anxious about the consequences of aging. The central character of *Voyage in the Dark* has only just begun to menstruate when she starts to fear "all the things you get—old and sad and everything" (72), and Marya in *Quartet* "imagined with dread that she was growing old" at twenty-four (17). Even in their titles, Rhys's novels *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* and *Good Morning, Midnight* emphasize their central characters' fear of the future as they advance into middle age. Similarly, the novels of Virginia Woolf, which I had learned to interpret through early-twentieth-century scientific and philosophical approaches to time, registered differently when I attended not only to time in the abstract but also to how Woolf writes about the social and psychological implications of aging. Most famously, Clarissa Dalloway's sense of narrative foreclosure at the age of fifty-two leaves her with "the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 10). Whereas Woolf's Orlando playfully transcends the experience of aging (*Orlando*), the ability to develop a model for aging becomes crucial to survival for the female characters in *The Waves*: Susan accumulates offspring and property, and Jinny spends down her "hoard" of time as she ages, but Rhoda cannot build a model for aging and tragically finds herself, as she puts it, "outside the loop of time" (56, 22).[6] What I had understood as narrative experiments with abstract temporality registered differently when read in the context of a modernist culture that valorized masculine youth.[7]

That youth culture was lionized in the early decades of the twentieth century was well recognized: Ezra Pound's command to fellow modernists to "make it new" (12) could be understood as an injunction to "keep it young," a call that was made more explicit in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "The Futurist Manifesto": "When we are forty let younger and stronger men than we throw us in the waste paper basket like useless manuscripts!" But the implications for older women of this cult of masculine youth were not widely addressed in existing criticism. When I decided to focus my dissertation on ways in which anxieties about aging were written into narrative experimentation by modernist women writers, however, I began to understand why age studies in the humanities was not yet an institutionally validated area of investigation (*Nothing*). I brought my proposal to the director of the graduate program: he listened attentively and acknowledged that, as baby boomers got older, there might be growing attention to age as a category of analysis. Later, though, I heard from a colleague that the director had expressed reservations about my topic: "Age isn't sexy," he is purported to have said.

In the nearly twenty years since that exchange with the graduate director, what had been a tiny field of study has grown significantly.[8] Intersectional studies of age and other categories of identity and difference, including gender, sexuality, disability, and (albeit less frequently) race, are also proliferating. Nevertheless, as Kathleen Woodward—one of the earliest and most prominent scholars

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to develop theoretical models for interpreting the implications of age in literary narratives—recently asserted, "[I]t remains the case today that aging, in comparison with research on sexual and racial difference, has been virtually ignored in the humanities. Age is still the missing category in cultural studies."[9] In what follows, I propose rereading as a practice through which to develop a counternarrative to the assumption that "age isn't sexy" and to encourage greater attention to the implications of age in literary studies.

In their introduction to a 2006 journal special issue titled *Generations: Women, Age and Difference*, Victoria Bazin and Rosie White describe age as "the last difference, the unspoken but inevitable site of a difference not only *between* subjects but also a difference *within* subjects as they are exiled from their younger selves" (ii). The notion of exile corresponds to the way older people describe identifying with a younger self that is no longer manifested in their aging body or declining social position. However, this phrasing also suggests that the younger self is the true, or real, one and that time passing is experienced as increasing displacement or disconnection from that original self. The practice of rereading, however—when undertaken with attention to the implications of age—can expose assumptions about age stages and age hierarchies and help counteract those self-alienating cultural narratives.

What Spacks describes as the dynamic tension elicited through rereading and Lesser identifies as a vertiginous awareness of multiple selves, Gullette refers to as the "temporal shakiness" that results from the coexistence of diachronic selves (*Aged* 127). She proposes that we integrate these disparate selves by elaborating each as a conscious "age identity" from which to build "critical age autobiographies"—narratives that analyze how age ideology has been in play at each point on the life course. The goal is an awareness "weighted with culture at all ages. Aging would be a constitutive aspect of all identities, and identities would be an achievement of aging" (151). Such a practice, Gullette asserts, is endowed with subversive potential in a culture that insists on understanding age as loss and decline. At the same time, by fully considering the implications of age at each stage, this practice avoids equally narrow and reductive models of progress or "successful" aging.

Reading over time encourages awareness of age identities and is therefore an ideal ground for constructing age autobiographies that counter restrictive decline narratives.[10] The value of this process is evident in the other essays included in this feature, which attest to the accumulation and achievement of new insights and perspectives over time.[11] While it might seem that age autobiography is a practice that can only be undertaken in later life, Gullette asserts that "age autobiography can potentially be written by any subject old enough to have seen a prior self fade and a new one emerge and to know why" (149). Teaching age autobiography through rereading in the classroom could invite students to consider their own changing circumstances and perspectives, and the degree to which these are affected by cultural models of age stages.[12] Such a strategy could perhaps denaturalize pervasive and limiting age constructions and provide a means through which students might become more aware of their own age identities. They might become more attuned to the cultural demands of what Elizabeth Freeman calls "chrononormativity" and engage with other models of age, temporality, and intersections of identity (3). Moreover, by looking back at previous reading, they might consider how their own contexts and perspectives have changed and perhaps become more self-aware about the ways in which they also peer forward as they read. And such a practice might help to neutralize the kinds of cultural imperatives that contributed to Lily Bart's decline and to the fear it ignited in my twenty-nine-year-old self.

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As I write this, I acknowledge that my life has, in many ways, developed along precisely the course that I feared at twenty-nine: I am fifty, unmarried, and I have no children. Thanks to the growing field of age studies (as well as the feminism at its roots), I write that sentence with equanimity. Aware of the various age selves that contributed to who I have become, I'm equipped to resist cultural imperatives about the shape of a life and to welcome whatever multiple age identities might lie ahead.

Notes

1. Since men's social value isn't linked to age in the same way, it is not surprising that Selden's age is never specified. Lily jokes, however, that she is "old enough" not to mind being seen with him in public (implying that at her age, she has nothing to lose), whereas he is still young enough to warrant discretion (38).

2. More recent news stories—such as "You Can Freeze Your Eggs: You Can't Freeze Time," published in *The New York Times* in November 2014 (Polonsky), and "The Struggle to Conceive with Frozen Eggs," which appeared in *The Washington Post* in January 2018 (Cha)—provide a less optimistic perspective on one of these technologies.

3. Gullette explains—and proposes correctives to—cultural age ideologies in *Aged by Culture* and other works, including her recent book *Ending Ageism; or, How Not to Shoot Old People*.

4. M. Freeman defines narrative foreclosure as "the premature conviction that one's life story has effectively ended" (83). Randall and Khurshid, among others, discuss the implications of narrative foreclosure in old age but acknowledge that it can be experienced at any life stage.

5. Katz contrasts the absence of age studies (outside medical departments) to the ubiquity of gender and sexuality studies in his manifesto, "What Is Age Studies?"

6. Alternatively, Goyal and Charon argue that all the characters other than Bernard fail to grow into old age because they each "exist in a static universe, repeating their same sense of experience at each stage of their lives" (73).

7. For further elaboration, see my essays "'Money, for the Night Is Coming'" and "'Ages Are the Stuff!'"

8. The four-year effort to establish an MLA Age Studies Discussion Group, for example, is recounted in Swinnen et al.

9. The context of Woodward's remark is her own resonant essay on rereading, after thirty-five years, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*, a foundational text for age studies.

10. Age-conscious attention to rereading offers a bridge between practices of literary criticism and narrative care as called for by, e.g., Zeilig (13) and Swinnen and Port (10–11).

11. Woodward's essay on Beauvoir provides another model for rereading the future through age autobiography: "[T]oday," she explains, "I'm not reading Beauvoir 'against' herself as I had earlier. Rather I am reading *with* her. I am reading autobiographically, as a woman a decade older than was Beauvoir when her book was published, testing my experience against her writing—and life."

12. Duffus writes about his decision, inspired by Spacks, to include in his American literature survey books that students are likely to have read before. "My hope," he explains, "was that the students would note ways in which their improved understanding . . . served as a measure of [personal] change" (32). He goes on to quote Spacks, who writes, "Rereading brings us more sharply in contact with how we—like the books we reread—have both changed and remained the same" (9).

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