

WRITING ON...
FIVE 'OLDER' POETS RESPOND TO OUR THEME



R V BAILEY

...the long looked forward to,
Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity
And the wisdom of age?

T S Eliot, *East Coker, Four Quartets*

Eliot hadn't in fact been looking for these things all that long, considering he was only in his middle fifties. Like all of us, he has a longer past than a future, but he wasn't all that old. And he wasn't a woman. Perspectives are changing all the time, whatever age you are, and older women poets have been adding to their store of experience and the richness of their skills all their lives. Calm and serenity and wisdom aren't necessarily part of the deal, whether you're he or she. Poets sometimes pause. But they don't stop.

The days have gone when you'd have been thought of as a 'woman poet', let alone 'an older woman poet'. *The Rattlebag*, that popular anthology Hughes and Heaney edited in 1982, included 137 poets – from all over the world, and from every age, beginning with Anon. Just eight of them were women. And one of them was writing in the fourteenth century. Things do change.

Can you imagine anyone who's interested in poetry checking up on the *age* of a poet, before deciding whether they like a poem? Good older women get credit from readers who find themselves delighted by what they've read, whether the writer's nineteen or ninety.

Poets like to experiment, and to keep their hand in. But aiming 'to develop new techniques'? How bloodless and self-conscious can you be? Poems either come or else they don't, and they dictate their own form. The poem is the engine; if and when it needs to come, it comes, with the exception of Occasional Poems – which are lucky if they turn out to be poems at all.

And we do move with the poetical fashions of the age; it would be surprising if any poet, who reads and hears poems all the time, should ever be so completely out of touch with the music of contemporary poetry as to be unaffected by it. Older women poets are developing all through their lives, unless they've closed the windows of their minds. Let's hear it for them!

And let's leave their birth certificates behind.

Crop

Now is when squirrels gorge on hazelnuts,
And dormice settle down for the big sleep.

Now is when redwings and fieldfares
Box the compass, and take their bearings

For this modest island. Now is when trees
Explode in a salvo of red, brown, yellow,

And look their bonniest. Now is when humans,
After the tyrannies of career, love-affairs, children,

Relax into the long perspectives of age, knowing
How rich they are in memories, how time is on their side.

U A Fanthorpe



Despite ambivalence about being labelled, I accepted ARTEMISpoetry's invitation to confront my present status as an older woman poet. Luckily many of us 'o.w.p.s' have inner selves that don't correspond to ageing, deteriorating bodies. The relationship between inner self and outer world(s) continues to preoccupy me – how 'outsight' may lead to insight.

NADINE BRUMMER

Growing older I'm even more convinced of the urgency of coming to grips with one's subjectivity. My poems often, unfashionably, contain the 'I' in a way discrepant from the aesthetic of many contemporary poets. I may share cultural, social and, above all, political concerns in a conflicted and conflictual world but haven't integrated these imaginatively enough for poems, excepting those on my Jewish identity.

Of course, I'd like to connect with a wider readership but value more writing for discovery. Old Women should be explorers (v. Eliot); I explore more deeply aspects of childhood to retrieve and preserve them against loss and also to develop new perspectives on family and religion, the context of my present search for meaning.

Unfazed by changing fashions, prejudices and proscriptions I hope to maintain mental and linguistic energy to respond to whatever in nature or art triggers an impulse of delight or initiates interrogation. The challenge is to continue to use poems to think as well as feel with, which often surprise me by their endings.



Older Women Career Poets: Every writer is individual, individually motivated and rewarded. Motivation probably varies greatly as a poet ages (the lure of prizes can help) but poetry has rarely been well-paid anyway. I like the story of Lu Yu in Al Purdy's poem, Lu Yu (AD 1125-1209). It begins: "On the day of Lu Yu's last sickness / a thin coffin was ready, / and two quilts to cover him, / and the gravediggers paid, / their work done. / Then he started to write another poem / a short time before death ..."

KATHERINE GALLAGHER

Few poets, men or women, are so involved in their writing. Nor, sadly, is their culture. Everything is relative but we seem to be seeped in the 'youth' culture. It's a fact that in some poetry circles, the elderly are ignored, partly in terms of expectation. But then poetry itself is often ignored. Hence, the value of support-groups like Second Light.

Probably the most important factor behind the question of late careers in women's poetry is the pressure of the desire to write, to achieve and keep writing. Good health (as the obituaries in ARTEMISpoetry remind us) is perhaps the next most important factor. Meanwhile, there are many other distractions such as family, which may interfere and delay the writing.

What about new challenges? There are always new challenges – next poem, book, new techniques? The so-called search for 'serenity' is probably a hindrance. Yes, best to keep on, read widely, do reviews. submit work, 'Make it new', as Pound said. A poet at no matter what age, still has to confront the problem of finding time, incentive, publishing outlets, writing-space, remuneration, criticism, and support. Oh dear, remember Lu Yu...



My thinking and writing processes seem to differ little at 90 from those I recall at 9 or younger. They are a given, as is my basic physical structure. There is perhaps more freedom in old age since people tend to disregard you more and attempt to guide or influence you less.

M R PEACOCKE

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As in childhood, I do not live very responsibly. I look and listen, and I play. I play with words because they fascinate me for sound and pattern as well as meaning, and for their spontaneous behaviour in my mind. I return often to the ancient stories, folk, Biblical and myth, but am more aware now of their philosophical implications – that's one difference. Another is that I rarely now describe things directly: what I observe finds its place in metaphor. Keats's idea of negative capability seems to have been with me from the start, though not consciously as later.

Limitations of sight and energy mean that I don't read, or investigate other people's work, very much. (Do I want to?) I continue to develop my technical skills because I love the craft, and I explore, experiment and take risks as much or more than before. Making poems continues to be an essential way of examining my relationship with the world, especially the natural world, and of discovering what I think and feel.



To my mind most older women poets today are writing at the height of their powers.

I know I am.

MYRA SCHNEIDER

For one thing I and they have a lifetime of experience behind them. We've also had time to develop our technical skills. I wrote poems when I was at secondary school, also at university and immediately afterwards but the male-dominated, pretentious and very limited poetry scene – there were none of today's workshops and range of poetry groups – put me off and I veered away from poetry altogether for about fifteen years. Instead, I wrote some naïve adult novels and then novels for young people, some of which were published. In my forties I crept back to writing and reading poetry and by my mid-fifties, with two collections published, I'd made poetry my writing medium. I have been developing my technical skills, subject matter and approaches ever since. The love of narrative, which I've retained, I use in some of my work to explore a range of subjects. I am certain my most recent poetry collection is my best and the response to it confirms my opinion.