In Slavic studies, aging and old age have thus far been only marginal concerns. This volume brings together the scattered research that has been done up to now on aging as represented and narrated in Slavic literatures. The essays investigate Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Polish, Russian, Slovak, Slovene and Ukrainian representations of age/aging in various literary genres and epochs and analyze age as a powerful marker of difference and as constitutive of social relations and personal identity.

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Introduction

DAGMAR GRAMSHAMMER-HOHL

AGING RESEARCH AND SLAVIC STUDIES

Aging and old age are aspects of human experience that have always inspired literary imagination. In recent decades, scholarly attention has increasingly been paid to aging as represented and narrated in literature. Age/aging studies have become more and more aware of the degree to which the critical analysis of works of fiction can contribute to our understanding of the aging process in all its diversity. Nevertheless, there is still an urgent need for greater attention to age in the humanities. This holds true all the more for Slavic studies, where thus far aging and old age have been only marginal concerns – even though it was a Russian scientist, Il’ja Mečnikov [Il’ja Mechnikov, Élie Metchnikoff], who, in 1903, introduced the term “gerontology” (gerontologija) to the scientific community (see Katz 1996: 82) and defined it as extending beyond the boundaries set by medicine and thus as “the first interdisciplinary venture of the 20th century” (Martin/Gillen 2014: 52). And although a cultural studies approach has by now become widespread in Slavic philology, there still is a striking lack of interest in how people are “aged by culture” (Gullette 2004).

This is even more surprising as old age and aging are important topics in Slavic literatures. Regrettably, only few Slavic texts have caught the attention of aging researchers. It is significant that a recent “Encyclopedia of Aging” project registered on its headword list not more than two Slavic literary texts, in fact two Russian ones (compared to a quite impressive number of English-language works): Tolstoj’s [Tolstoi’s] The Death of Ivan
Il’ich (Smert’ Ivana Il’iča, 1886) and Anton Čechov’s [Chekhov’s] The Seagull (Čajka, 1896). It is a fact that, on the one hand, aging research very much centers on the U.S. and Great Britain, and, as far as literary studies are concerned, on American and British fiction. Moreover, a large number of pertinent Slavic texts are not available in translation. On the other hand, the scattered contributions to aging studies which have been published by Slavicists and scholars from East and Southeast European countries themselves are often written in Slavic languages, or at least rarely in English. This volume thus aims to popularize among aging researchers as well as among an interested broader audience related findings from Slavic studies scholarship and to make available in English some material translated especially for this purpose from Slavic literatures.

Representations of old age and aging in Slavic languages, literatures and cultures have thus far been subject to investigation mostly in individual research papers. A noteworthy exception is an international conference of Slavicists at Wrocław University, Poland, convened in 2015 and dedicated to old age as one of the “big themes of culture in Slavic literatures” (Wielkie tematy kultury w literaturach słowiańskich: Starość); a special issue of the journal Slavica Wratislaviensia is being prepared on the topic. Apart from that, some very short and general overviews on Russian literature exist, such as by Robert H. Stacy (1989) or Klaus Städtke (2010). In addition, images of aging and elderly characters have to some extent been analyzed by researchers as part of their work on particular writers. This volume’s goal is thus also to foster international scholarly exchange within and across the discipline and to encourage further research in this vein.

AGING AND LITERATURE

Almost 30 years ago, in 1990, Anne M. Wyatt-Brown wrote about the coming-of-age of literary gerontology and set out to define the approach (Wyatt-Brown 1990): in her words, it examines the impact of aging on literature both in creative works and in the lives of their creators. Among literary gerontology’s categories of analysis she mentioned “literary attitudes” toward aging. Another, nowadays perhaps more common wording would be “discourses”: literature, on the one hand, reproduces dominant discourses on aging and old age. Implicitly, however, it subverts them by challenging
meanings such as those of “being old” or “growing old”. Rüdiger Kunow uses the post-colonial paradigm to describe what can be observed notably in contemporary literature: a “writing back” against hegemonic discourse on aging from what he calls, with reference to May Sarton, the “foreign country of old age” (Kunow 2005: 39-40). In Irina Savkina’s words, only in more recent fiction does the aging subject reacquire “flesh and voice” ("плоть и голос") (Savkina 2011: 135). Works by the Russian writers Tat’jana Tolstaja [Tolstaia] and Ljudmila Ulickaja [Ulitskaia] or by the Croatian author Dubravka Ugrešić are cases in point. Literary gerontology makes this “writing back” explicit and, as a consequence, presents alternative visions of age and aging. As Stephen Katz (2014) has noted, “[n]arrative is particularly important because it anchors the inside of aging, bringing together self and society and animating our biographies as we borrow, adapt, interpret, and reinvent the languages, symbols, and meanings around us to customize our personal stories.” Literary gerontology, thus, forms part of age/aging studies insofar as it “critique[s] the practices by which current forms of knowledge and power about aging have assumed their authority as a form of truth” (ibid.).

Conversely, it has rightly been stated that “new trends in society affect the conventions of fiction” (Wyatt-Brown 2002). It is, of course, important to consider the aesthetic dimension of the literary text and to address questions such as: to which literary and rhetorical devices does the text resort? What function does old age imagery fulfill within a specific text? To what extent does language use reflect or interfere with dominant discourses on age and aging? Which impact does the aging theme have on the choice of genre – and vice versa? Generally: how are aging and old age narrated in specific contexts? How do representations of old age and aging change over time? Such are the questions on which the contributions to this volume have focused.

**AGING IN DIFFERENT CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS**

It proved quite difficult to group this volume’s contributions into fitting sections. Each article covers several aspects, so forcing them into neatly distinct parts would not do their complexity justice. I therefore decided to
present the articles in a reverse-chronological manner, starting from the
(seemingly) most familiar – contemporary representations of old age and
aging – and completing the literary tour in medieval times.

The articles encompass a variety of Slavic languages, literary epochs
and genres. They are devoted to Croatian, Polish, Russian and Old Russian,
Serbian, Slovak, Slovene and Ukrainian literatures and compare them in
part to Austrian and what have come to be called “transnational” texts. The
covered time span ranges from the Middle Ages, the Croatian Renaissance
to Polish Classicism and embraces the whole of the 20th century from Rus-
sian Modernism to the present. Various genres have been investigated as
well, though the autobiographical ones have been paid special attention.
LUBICA VOLANSKÁ’s contribution even goes beyond narrow definitions of
literariness and is dedicated to the genre of popular autobiography. Memo-
irs have been contrasted with diverse forms of private writings, namely di-
aries (IRINA SAVKINA) and letters (WIESŁAWA DUŻY). Both contributors
agree in their conclusions that not all autobiographical genres seem to be
considered by their authors equally appropriate to treating the experience of
aging: apparently, it is not dealt with in memoirs.

Of particular importance for the articles in this volume is the gender as-
pect. As has been demonstrated, the discourse on aging and the gender dis-
course are closely connected. Neither of the two categories of “age” or
“gender” can be explained adequately by itself, nor are they related to each
other in a mere additive or hierarchical way. Age identity is gendered, just
as gender identity is determined by age. This is the general conclusion we
can draw when studying intersectionality, among other things in literary
representations of aging (see Gramshammer-Hohl 2014, 2016; Hartung

In one way or another, the age-gender link is addressed in almost every
contribution. Some of the articles, however, place special emphasis on it:
MARIJA GEIGER ZEMAN and ZDENKO ZEMAN have analyzed the novel The
Skeletons of Madison County (Kosturi okruga Madison, 2012) by Croatian
author Vedrana Rudan and show how the text challenges sexist and ageist
discourses on gender, age and sexuality. IRINA SAVKINA has investigated
women’s diaries of the Soviet era and analyzed what it meant to grow old
the Soviet way and wherein lie the “femaleness” – and “Sovietness” – of
the aging process that is represented by the diarists. LUBICA VOLANSKÁ, by
comparing popular autobiographies from Bratislava and Vienna, has no-
noticed differences in the Slovak and Austrian authors’ respective representations of female and male experiences of old age, which can be explained by different cultural and historical backgrounds. Finally, ANDREAS LEBEN gives an overview of Slovene autobiographical writing from a gender perspective and argues that the topic of sexuality was a main motivation for discussing the body in Slovene literature and, as a consequence, the topic of aging.

Several contributions are dedicated to close readings of particular fictional texts. LIANA GOLETIANI has analyzed the Ukrainian novel Jakiv’s Century (Stolittja Jakova, 2010) by Volodymyr Lys, in which the protagonist’s hundredth birthday is an occasion for him to look back and draw conclusions from his eventful life; his deeply personal memories at the same time reflect one hundred years of Ukrainian history. ANDREA ZINK has explored a fragmentary text by the Serbian-Canadian author David Albahari, Tsing (Cink, 1988), which eludes any generic definition, “collapsing” before the reader just like the narrator’s old, dying father. DIMITRIOS MELETIS has examined a prose sketch by Russian symbolist Adelaida Gercyk [Gertsyk], On Old Age (O starosti, 1915), which through its elaborate composition discloses contradictory discourses about the fears and joys of aging.

Two contributions draw comparisons between several fictional texts – novels and novellas (povesti). ILARIA REMONATO’s article is dedicated to the image of old age in the works of two Soviet novelists, Valentin Rasputin and Jurij Trifonov, representatives of Russian “village prose” and “urban prose,” respectively. She highlights distinguishing features as well as formal and thematic affinities between the two authors’ texts. My own (DAGMAR GRAMSHAMMER-HOHL) contribution explores how images of age and aging are used in narratives of homecoming to depict the discontinuities of life caused by exile and return to the motherland; to this end, I have analyzed novels by the Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov, the Czech-French writer Milan Kundera and the Bosnian-Croatian author Miljenko Jergović.

NATALIA STAGL-ŠKARO has dedicated her contribution to the Dalmatian Renaissance poet Petar Hektorović, whose depiction of age roles marks the transition from medieval concepts to those of modern times. On the occasion, she also provides the readers with a full-length English translation of the poet’s age lament and epistle to his coeval Mavro Vetranović. Finally,
NICOLETTA CABASSI has examined the *Laurentian Chronicle* dating from 1377; starting from an analysis of the Old Russian lexicon of old age, she investigates how old age and the elderly were perceived within the medieval context of intersecting pagan and Christian world views.

As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, images of old age and aging are strongly conditioned by their respective historical and cultural setting: they may diverge significantly according to time and place. In any case, age functions as a powerful marker of difference and as constitutive of social relations and personal identity. The literary analyses collected in this volume bring to the fore the ways fiction challenges dominant cultural perceptions of age and provides alternative narratives of aging across the lifespan.

**REFERENCES**


