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Ageing and dignity<sup>1</sup>*Stories of old age from the welfare state*

AASTA MARIE BJORVAND BJØRKØY

**ABSTRACT** Uniform treatment of the elderly (those over 65) is neither worthy nor fair. This article examines how the elderly are depicted as well as treated in the short story 'Ingenting hendt' (2000) by Bjarne Breiteig and the novel *Så høyt var du elsket* (2011) by Nikolaj Frobenius. Bjørkøy presents what forms of honour are addressed in these literary texts, and what existential issues may arise when we grow old, retired and sick in the Norwegian welfare state.

**KEY WORDS** old age | dignity | respect | honour | welfare state

**HONOUR UNDER THE WELFARE STATE?**

Compared with, for example, the classic honour culture of the Norsemen, the modern Norwegian welfare state can appear as an anti-honour culture. Moreover, modern society's meetings between strong, classic honour cultures on one side and Western (secularised) welfare societies on the other seem to point to a winding down, or indeed a winding up, of honour culture. But do we really live in a culture where there are no important forms of honour? According to Frank Henderson Stewart, the concept of honour has in modern times become individualised (Stewart 1994). This undermines such traditional honour groups as the family, the clan and the nation, in addition to, as James Bowman points out, Western honour culture in general (2006). Put simply, we can say, as Peter F. Hjort has done, that the old, stable agrarian society offered security, its confines and expectations being predefined, while modern society offers freedom, the individual being able to a greater extent to make choices and thus liberate him/herself from traditions (Hjort 2010, 29). In his book *Honor. A History* from 2006, Bowman calls our late modern society a 'post-honor society'. However, as the American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah emphasises, honour is not just a personal matter (Appiah 2010,

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1. This article is translated by Richard Burgess.

61). Honour is rooted in society. Social interaction and interpersonal relations reveal the different forms of honour that are at play. Thus the tendency towards individualisation is partly counteracted by the concept and sense of honour. I will argue that it is the dominant norms and values in the community that determine whether a sense of honour is strengthened or weakened.

But has there really been a winding-up of honour culture in the Norwegian welfare state? We can perhaps rather say that there has been a development in the concept of honour. Appiah argues that ‘we live not after honor but with new forms of honor’ (Appiah 2010, 193). The factors that weaken or strengthen an individual’s honour will constantly be changing. But if we can speak of a winding-up of honour culture in Norwegian society, I would argue that an individual’s honour, in the form of respect, identity, integrity and dignity, is undermined or indeed eliminated when an individual reaches old age. Literature, however, can help bolster the respect, identity, integrity and dignity of the aged by drawing attention to this, thus securing them the honour they need, both for themselves and in order to be seen and treated in a dignified fashion.<sup>2</sup>

In her book *Om ære* [About honour] Unni Wikan writes: ‘Ære er et begrep som i alle samfunn er forbundet med noe positivt’ [Honour is a concept associated with something positive in all societies] (2008, 9). However, I associate the term *honour* primarily with noble or heroic deeds, as well as with power ‘fordi det er en elite eller de innflytelsesrike som setter standardene for hva som skal gjelde’ [because it is an elite or those with influence who set the agenda] (Wikan 2008, 9). The term honour is not unambiguously positive. The term, in my view, is more generally associated with such factors as class and status than with factors like respect and dignity. Honour and respect do not mean the same thing, but respect can help strengthen the honour one is assigned by others as well as one’s own sense of honour. I would argue that weakened respect gives weakened honour and that honour is about value in one’s own and in others’ eyes, about self-respect and social respect (Wikan 2008, 9). As such, the concept of honour is relevant and essential also in an anti-honour culture. For every individual it is important to be

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2. Does the word dignity have a rather old-fashioned quality to it? And why is the word dignity often linked to old age? The word is not out of date, but it seems to occur most frequently in reference to or texts about the aged. The ageing individual gives the word dignity actuality as soon as the process of ageing leads to deviation from the norm, from what is accustomed and expected. The concept of dignity becomes visible and necessary as soon as dignity is threatened in some way. So dignity is a word that has particularly validity when referring to people with different sorts of psychological and physical disabilities. Dignity is thus a word that particularly crops up when we are focusing on people that in one way or another deviate from the so-called norm.

treated with dignity and at the same time feel dignified. Wikan emphasises that honour is a complicated concept – both historically and culturally there are paradoxes implicit in it (Wikan 2008, 9). It is, for example, a paradox that in old age, as the eldest in the family with the longest life experience, with knowledge and skills gathered through a long life, one can suddenly go from having a respected and honourable position in the family and in society to being excluded, seen as unable to contribute or participate. Another paradox is: How can the last phase of life, which necessarily involves decline, illness and death, be dignified? Some 2000 years ago, Cicero formulated this most obvious of paradoxes: ‘Everyone wants a long life, but no one wants to grow old’.

### LIFE PHASE TRANSITIONS

Old age brings with it concrete physical and mental changes, and thus influences our quality of life and our relationships in different ways. Literature can show us which existential problems old age brings with it, and how it can feel to grow old in Norway’s welfare society. In this article I will explore how this is depicted in Bjarte Breiteig’s short story ‘Ingenting hendt’ [Nothing happened] from *Surrogater* (2000) and in Nikolaj Frobenius’s novel *Så høyt var du elsket* [You Were so Deeply Loved]<sup>3</sup> (2011). How does honour play out, and in what changing forms, in the lives of the two fictional old men that Breiteig and Frobenius portray? How does their age and their ageing impact on the honour they are assigned and have to live with in the final phase of their lives? Frobenius’s novel depicts an ageing father from the perspective of his son, while in ‘Ingenting hendt’ it is the ageing person himself that is the main character.

‘Ingenting hendt’ starts with Leif, an employee at an ironworks, ending his last day at work by taking a shower. Leif is leaving behind the community of the workplace and starting his life as a pensioner. The insistent title ‘Ingenting hendt’ [Nothing happened] emphasises how this transition on the one hand is treated as a nothing, perhaps because it is necessary. On the other hand, his retirement means everything, because it is implied that it will have a far-reaching effect on Leif’s situation and quality of life. It is worth noticing that in the opening line of the short story Leif says ‘Jaja’ [Oh well] (Breiteig 2000, 25). Together with the title, this utterance emphasises an apparent indifference, or perhaps more precisely, a resignation about his situation. However, his ‘oh well’ and the title’s insistence that this

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3. *For so you were loved* would have been a more opening and sufficient title to the translation, because of the allusion to the Bible.

final day at work is a nothing are belied by his reaction in the shower. Thus they underline that Leif cannot find the words to express, or is emotionally incapable of expressing, how difficult and upsetting his retirement is for him. This is also reflected in Leif's attempt to play down and avoid more farewells by showering before the others.

The story begins in *media res* with Leif entering the changing room. His helmet is covered with dried iron sludge, which Leif throws in the waste bucket (Breiteig 2000, 25). This apparently trivial action provides a parallel to Leif's situation – like the iron sludge, Leif's working life has now in a sense dried up. Like his helmet, he has symbolically ended up in the waste bucket. Leif has left the control room early tonight. 'I natt var det ikke engang nødvendig å stemple ut, hadde Taraldsen sagt. Bare den siste dusjen gjensto' [Tonight it wasn't even necessary to clock off, Taraldsen had said. The only thing that remained was the final shower] (Breiteig 2000, 25). The words 'even', 'only' and 'final' emphasise what a milestone his retirement represents, what a dramatic transition he faces, as if retirement from working life marks the end of life itself. And yet this transition is a nothing, because retirement is a necessity both for health-related and societal reasons.

Leif knows every nook and cranny, every routine, every sound: 'Gjennom vindusruten lød fabrikkstøyen bare som et mykt surr, men han kunne likevel skille ut de enkelte komponentene' [The factory noise through the window was just a soft hum, but even so he could distinguish the individual components] (2000, 26). This confirms how the ironworks in a sense is physically a part of Leif. He can sense and identify the smallest sound: 'Han visste hva det var alt sammen. Han kunne ha jobbet hvor som helst i hele anlegget' [He knew what it all was. He could have worked anywhere in the whole plant] (2000, 26). While Leif is taking in the sounds of the ironworks, his cigarette goes out between his fingers and he feels small twinges in his back. It is not just his cigarette that has trouble staying alight in this period. The metaphor of extinguishment recurs throughout the story and is significant, establishing a semantic field at both a micro and a macro level in the story. The twinges can be understood as a reaction to retirement, a physical expression of grief. However, we are told that 'en ny smerteri' [a new obsession with pain] is on the way (2000, 26). So he has also had pain before that has interfered with his work. He can no longer open and close valves, and for the last few months he has been left sitting in the control room or wandering aimlessly around watching the others (2000, 26). Pain has prevented him doing the work he knows so well. Thus his work contribution did not end on his last day of work – in practice it has been over for the last few months. The twinges, however, may be his

body's reaction to the retirement he has been dreading for so long. At the same time they can be an expression of the physical decline that the ageing process has inevitably brought upon him that prevents him from functioning as before. The pain may be psychosomatic, i.e. rooted in both physiology and psychology, and thus complex. It contributes to making Leif unfit for work, making retirement necessary, but retirement itself is perhaps also a factor in his experience of pain. It seems reasonable to interpret Leif's back pains as more than just physiological, given that Leif is a classic Breiteig character. He is uncommunicative, silent, lonely and thus vulnerable. His back pains are perhaps an expression of what he cannot express in words?

Leif receives an honourable send-off, he is given a watch and a long handshake by way of thanks. 'Leif hadde ikke følt noe da. Han var verken trist eller bitter' [Leif hadn't felt anything then. He was neither sad nor bitter] (2000, 27). The word 'then' reveals that Leif may have felt something before the retirement ceremony. If not, the reaction came afterwards, in the shower. His reaction is physical, a pain gathers in his back, 'som om en kniv skar frem og tilbake over ryggspylen nå, uten å komme igjennom' [like a knife cutting back and forth across his spine, without getting through] (2000, 27). In the Norwegian welfare society I would argue that honour is strongly associated with one's occupation and work contribution, perhaps especially for men. As age researcher Runar Bakken points out, the role of being 'the others' is often different for men and women: 'Kvinner opprettholder i større grad sin tilknytning til fellesskapet gjennom et ansvar for barn og barnebarn, mens menn – bortsett fra de mektige og de som er rike på eiendom, penger og kunnskap – ser ut til å miste alt idet de mister sin arbeidsevne. Menn blir i radikal forstand et objekt' [Women maintain their connection to a fellowship to a greater degree through their responsibility for children and grandchildren, while men – with the exception of those that are powerful or rich in property, money or knowledge – seem to lose *everything* when they lose their work capacity. Men become, in a radical sense, an object.] (Bakken 2014, 52). Breiteig's Leif illustrates this and shows that the concept of honour can be regarded as gendered. Unni Wikan expresses this simply: 'Menn har ære, kvinner har skam' [Men have honour, women have shame] (Wikan 2008, 9). The end of working life means the end of collegiality, of the structure and commitment that have been the foundation of Leif's existence and that have given his life content and thereby also dignity and an essential self-esteem. Thus Leif's story illustrates how belonging to a fellowship and making some sort of contribution is crucial to an individual's feeling of dignity, and is the form of honour that has most influence on self-esteem and self-confidence.

## FROM DIGNITY TO HUMILIATION

Studies carried out in the 1970s by Donald Cowgill and Lowell Holmes show that the status and prestige of old people declines proportionally with the capitalist modernisation of society. In pre-modern society old age represented a golden age, since communities were more stable. The focus was on recreating, not changing society. Reaching a great age meant to a large extent that one had made wise life choices. The experience and knowledge of old people was therefore valuable for the survival of the community. In modern society, which undergoes continual development and change, the status and prestige of the old is diminished because their knowledge, their experiences and skills quickly become obsolete (Bakken 2014, 41). One could object here that the problem depends on which occupation one retires from. Perhaps retirement is least problematic for academics, since they feel secure at the top of their profession, and retirement gives them the freedom to immerse themselves further in their field. But the transition to retirement can trigger an existential crisis since identity, as well as the feeling of making a contribution, is first and foremost linked to work. Leif's boss confirms that Leif has played an important role: 'Det er trist å gi slipp på en som deg, hadde Taraldsen sagt. Det er vanskelig å finne arbeidsvillige folk nå for tiden [...] Du har sannelig stått på' [It's sad to let someone like you go, Taraldsen had said. It's difficult to find people willing to work these days [...] You certainly have worked hard] (2000, 26–27). Age researcher Cowgill concludes in a study from 1986 that old people had lower status in industrialised countries, where retirement and moving into nursing homes was seen as a social substitute for death. However, Cowgill points to a strengthening of family values as an appropriate means of counteracting this reversal of status and prestige (cf. Bakken 2014, 69). In modern society, the old can find existential meaning through other channels than work, for example, through relations with their children and grandchildren. However, it seems that Leif lacks any close relationships that might fill the function that work had. His situation demonstrates the gendered aspect of the honour code he is withdrawing from by retiring. The sense of identity and meaning that has given his life value and honour has been founded on a masculine collegiality. Domestic life offers an alternative environment that lacks what until now has given Leif's life meaning. With reference to Bakken's research, we may suppose that Leif would have had a different network and thereby a differently charged honour code to relate to had he been a woman. Leif lacks a relational apparatus that can take over the role that work has played.

Leif has a long working life behind him – we don't know how long, but long enough for him to be familiar with every sound and every task at the ironworks. The

work there is a natural part of his everyday life. As a pensioner he is withdrawing from what Michel Foucault (1996) calls ‘the order of things’. The fixed points in Leif’s everyday existence disappear. According to Bakken, this break with the order of things is a typical problem for the old in a number of ways – both mentally and physically, old people experience a disintegration of the familiar, a movement towards boundlessness (Bakken 2014, 27–29). Leif’s pain and his loss of work entitlement lead him to losing his grip on himself, on his everyday life, on the order that apparently keeps him afloat. His new existence as a pensioner requires him to build up a new daily routine. But Leif has no plan: ‘Og heretter var det bare stolen der hjemme. Sitte der og kjenne kniven. Det var det eneste som var igjen’ [And from now on there was nothing but the chair at home. To sit there and feel the knife. That was all that was left] (2000, 30). It seems that Leif only functions when working at the ironworks. There he knows what to do, he is purposeful, useful, active and part of a collegium. Outside the ironworks, on the other hand, he is dysfunctional, lonely and useless. But lately his back problems have prevented him contributing as before, a situation that seems to be quite as degrading as having to retire.

Leif has no illusions of having a good old age in store. He is left to ‘nothing but the chair’ (2000, 30). Bakken emphasises that old age ‘er en ikke-feiret overgang, som hver enkelt av oss er overlatt til oss selv å skulle fikse’ [is a non-celebratory transition which each of us is left to manage on our own] (2014, 207). Leif tries to manage by escaping from his collegium, showering before the others in order to avoid more farewells. After that the strategy seems to be to sit at home alone in a chair. Leif’s idea about having ‘nothing but the chair’ in store, since that is all he is good for, reveals that he sees retirement as little more than a waiting-room for death. Work was life. He has no strategy for creating a life as a pensioner. And until he becomes in need of care, the welfare state will leave him to his own devices, except for the financial support his pension represents.

In a book to be published in 2017 with the tentative title *Ageing Wisely*, Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore examine ‘the moral, legal, and economic dilemmas of old age’ which they believe have been neglected by philosophy. Here both Nussbaum and Levmore reject the notion that age leads to and represents renunciation. At the same time they argue in favour of a flexible pension age (Aviv 2016). Retirement from work can represent a relief, a liberation and reward for some, while for others, as for Leif, it can be experienced as a renunciation, a punishment and an end to everything that gives meaning and makes life worth living. Nussbaum, who was born in 1947, makes the point that if she herself were forced to retire, it would ‘affect me psychologically in a very deep way [...] I might just get depressed’ (Aviv 2016). Leif’s story illustrates the reaction that Nussbaum describes.

When Leif is on his way into the shower, a boy enters the changing room. He is a cleaner and a stranger to Leif. He asks if Leif is going to shower now, pointing out that shower time is not until five o'clock (2000, 27–28). Leif stands there with a little towel that doesn't even reach around his waist and can only say yes. His nakedness emphasises his vulnerability. The boy doesn't know who Leif is or that this is his last day at work, and the boy's lack of insight and understanding only increases the sense of humiliation and loneliness in the nothingness that marks the end of his working life. Memories of what, for Leif, were the good old days resurface and stand in contrast to the present silence of the changing room: 'Det var så stille der nå. Ingen prat eller latter som gjallet mellom veggene' [It was so quiet there now. No talk or laughter echoing off the walls.] (2000, 29). The collegiality between 'gutter som tåler en støyt' [lads who can take a thing or two] is gone, replaced by the chair that is waiting at home and by the cleaner who doesn't know it is Leif's last day and therefore shows no understanding for his need to shower now, earlier than usual.

The fact that Leif has spent the last few months sitting in the control room or aimlessly wandering around watching the others (cf. 2000, 26) represents a long drawn-out humiliation that escalates and reaches its climax in the shower on this last day at work. Leif suffers a fall: 'Han kjente bare et vagt sting gjennom rygg-raden idet kroppen traff flisegulvet' [He felt no more than a vague twinge through his spine as his body hit the tiled floor] (2000, 33). The unknown cleaner is startled and wants to call for help. But Leif doesn't want to be found like this. 'Må bare ligge her og komme meg litt, hvasket han' [I just need to lie here and recuperate a little, he whispered] (2000, 33). But the boy looks at his watch. 'Du må nok prøve å komme deg opp, sa han. Du kan jo ikke bare ligge her heller' [You'll have to try and get up, he said. You can't just lie here] (2000, 33). The words 'nok', 'jo', 'bare' and 'heller' reveal the boy's impatience and lack of insight into Leif's situation and accentuate his view of the old man as a nuisance who is preventing him getting his work done. Then Leif throws up: 'Han fikk akkurat vridd hodet til siden idet det kom veltende opp av ham, flere kraftige støt ut over flisene. For hver brekning var det som om noe revnet i ryggen' [He just managed to turn his head to one side as it came pouring out of him onto the tiles in several powerful convulsions. Each convulsion felt like something ripped in his back] (2000, 33). The boy steps forward and puts a supporting hand on Leif's forehead. Thus he shows concern, but still a lack of understanding when he calls for assistance and suggests that the incident was caused by Leif showering in water that was too hot for him (2000, 34). The reader takes a different view to the boy, because we know and understand more about Leif's situation – and why he needs to shower just now. To

the extent that the reader gains this insight, it is an example of how literature can stimulate reflection on ethical questions such as ‘How can I be a good person?’ Leif’s story and the boy cleaner’s management of the shower situation can help develop the reader’s ability to react with empathy and humanity in similar situations. As Nussbaum points out in her book *Poetic Justice*, literature can ‘be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision’ (1995, 12). Moreover, literature can be part of a democratic project: ‘The poet in effect becomes the voice of silenced people, sending their speech out of himself as a kind of light for the democracy’ (Nussbaum [1997] 2003, 96).

The fall in the shower can be seen as a parallel to Leif’s metaphorical fall brought about by retirement. His disqualification from work due to age and health leads to a fall in dignity. Lying naked in the shower in his own vomit, under the eyes of a stranger, and having to be rescued on his last day at work, Leif’s humiliation is complete. The others will soon be coming to shower, ‘så måtte de vel til med avskjeden enda en gang’ [so they’d have to make their farewells all over again] (2000, 34). Retirement means the end of the dignity of (working) life. But the cleaner covers him with a towel, rings for help and shows a concern that lends a certain dignity to a humiliating situation. Leif had wanted to escape from the attention and circumstances that retirement entails, but ironically ends up experiencing a more emotional, humiliating and undignified departure than the one his age and retirement had already inflicted on him. Whether his colleagues will arrive before Leif is retrieved from the changing room, where he lies naked on the floor in his own vomit, is left open, but at the end Leif realises that ‘Det var bare å gi seg over’ [All he could do was surrender] (2000, 34).

The resignation expressed in the conclusion of the story mirrors the resigned ‘oh well’ of the story’s opening line, giving the impression that nothing is important, that nothing has happened. According to short story theorist Graham Good, a typical feature of the genre is that there is a forewarning of the ending in the opening. In our short story this forewarning is primarily to be found in Leif’s attitude: ‘The novella is a closed form whose end is latent in its beginning: there is usually some initial indication that the end is known, and this enhances the narrative art of holding in suspense what it is’ (Good 1994, 163). In spite of Leif’s initial and final resignation it is evident that his retirement means everything. Thus he acknowledges his hopeless situation and accepts help, which can be seen as positive, as a sign that he will both receive and accept help later also. At the end of the story, Leif is still lying in vomit and in pain on the shower floor. His physical position and situation illustrate and emphasise the undignified circumstances he finds himself in. But help is on the way, he is given attention and treated as an indi-

vidual with a right to assistance and care. However, if we widen our perspective from the shower scene, where Leif out of necessity both receives and accepts help, we may have the following objection: How much help will you get if all you have to offer in your engagement with retirement and old age is an ‘oh well’ and evasive resignation? The way we meet the challenge of old age depends on what Appiah in his book *The Ethics of Identity* calls ‘parameters’ and ‘limits’ (2005, 111). Leif seems poorly equipped, both verbally and emotionally, for the phase in life where old age becomes a ‘limit’ that distances him from his only ‘parameter’.

The genre of the short story offers only a slice of life and thus a limited insight into how things will go with Leif. Will the help he is given bring him no further than to his chair at home, or will his fall lead to him receiving recognition when he no longer takes part in working life and contributes to society? This is left open in the story. The novel *Så høyt var du elsket*, unlike Breiteig’s short story, depicts a longer time frame and a more gradual development. Thus it gives us more information. Breiteig’s short story focuses on the crucial moment when Leif enters a new existential phase, while his memories and thoughts present essential aspects of his background and his previous life. The retrospective elements widen and complement the focus on the present; they create what we might call ‘extended moments’. Breiteig’s short story can therefore be seen in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s term ‘threshold chronotope’, which is the chronotope (from *khronos* ‘time’ and *topos* ‘space’) of crisis and turning points (Bakhtin 1997, 157). Leif finds himself physically and mentally in a situation of existential transition, in a time frame where the present is represented in one crucial moment and where the room represents a central place in Leif’s working life, which turns out to have been his *life*. It is in the shower and the changing room that he has chatted with colleagues after a hard day throughout a long working life. The daily fellowship he has experienced in this room stands in contrast to his attempt to shower alone, an attempt that is first interrupted by a cleaner he doesn’t know and then thwarted by his back pains and vomiting. The threshold chronotope is the time frame that is most emotionally charged, which is accentuated by the humiliation Leif experiences in this moment.

Humiliation can be regarded as the antithesis of dignity. Although the humiliation of the situation increases under the gaze of the anonymous cleaner, the boy also shows respect by offering and calling for assistance. But how could Leif’s transition to retirement have been made more dignified? Is it Leif’s fault? Is it the individual alone who is responsible for creating a dignified retirement and old age? There are no easy answers to this. But Leif seems poorly equipped for old age, since his work has been his life, while towards the end it has also been too

hard, impairing his health. Leif embarks on his retirement both physically and mentally impaired.

## HOW TO NON-PRIORITISE DIGNITY

‘Eldre er svært forskjellige fra hverandre. Det finnes ingen gruppe i befolkningen som er mer ulike enn nettopp eldre’ [Old people are very different from each other. There is no segment of the population that are more varied than the old], argues age researcher Linn-Heidi Lunde in a letter to the newspaper *Morgenbladet*. Here she criticises Runar Bakken for not putting more emphasis on ‘alderdommens mangfold og de store individuelle variasjonene i helse, funksjon, interesser, ønsker og behov’ [the diversity of old age and the great individual variations in health, function, interests, desires and needs], a perspective that Lunde stresses as being the most important (Lunde 2015). In an age when new generations of old people have better health and economy, as well as a higher level of education than ever before, this is increasingly apparent. Healthy old people make up the majority (cf. Lunde 2015). I would therefore argue that the monolithic treatment of the old, as well as what we might call the monolithic nursing home, is worthy neither of our old people nor of our welfare society. ‘Det vi trenger, er først og fremst nyanterte bilder og perspektiver på alderdom og hva det vil si å eldes i vår samtid’ [What we need first and foremost are nuanced descriptions of and perspectives on old age and what the process of ageing means in our time], says Lunde (2015). Literature can offer that, for, as the editors of the anthology *Syg litteratur* [Sick literature] point out in the preface: ‘Litteraturen tilbyder en erkendelse og oplevelse, som vi ikke kan indhente på andre måter’ [Literature offers a cognition and an experience that cannot be obtained elsewhere] (Mai et al. 2016, 9).

*Så høyt var du elsket* tells the story of the middle-aged documentary filmmaker Emil and his father, Viktor, a 84-year-old retired doctor who until now has lived up to the modern ideal of an active, energetic old age. The action of novel starts with Viktor experiencing his first stroke. After repeated strokes he goes into decline, becoming a contrast to his former self and requiring assistance and care from both his family and from society. The respected and good-looking doctor is reduced to being an old man in need of nursing, a situation conducive to neither the respect, the recognition or the admiration that Viktor is accustomed to.

Unlike in Breiteig’s short story ‘Ingenting hendt’, the ageing Viktor is a secondary main character, while the Emil is the primary main character from whose perspective the story is told. Thus Viktor’s story is filtered through and coloured by the son’s emotional experience of his father’s ageing and decline. And while we

meet Breiteig's Leif at the point when he is starting life as a pensioner, Viktor has been one for some time. Thus Leif and Viktor face very different challenges, but nonetheless both caused by ageing: Leif has to find out how to live a good life as a pensioner without routines and a steady job. Viktor has to tackle the transition from healthy, well functioning pensioner to a sick person requiring nursing.

After his strokes Viktor suffers from kidney failure, arthritis, paranoia and anxiety. His son tries to secure him a place in a nursing home, but the bureaucratic judgement is that Viktor is not sick enough. The novel opens with Emil being woken by a telephone call from the hospital. His father has been taken ill, mostly likely with a stroke (Frobenius 2011, 5–7). Having arrived at the hospital, Emil is in an emotional crisis as he waits for the doctor. An old man in a zimmer frame shows concern and strokes his cheek: “Ikke gråt, gutten min,” sa han trøstende. [...] “Er det doktor Jansen du venter på? [...] Jansen er en bra mann,” sa han og kreket seg nedover korridoren på de knoklete beina’ [‘Don’t cry, lad’, he comforted. [...] . ‘Is it Dr Jansen you’re waiting for? [...] Jansen’s a good man’, he said and staggered off down the corridor on his bony legs] (Frobenius 2011, 12–13). However, the doctor who turns up is the opposite of Dr Jansen – Erik Velland, an athletic, stocky and muscular young doctor barely thirty years of age who summarily presses Emil’s hand and talks in a dismissive tone of voice accompanied by clichés like [‘d]et er jo ikke uvanlig for en mann i hans alder’ [it’s not unusual for a man of his age]. Emil counters by asking ‘Hva har alderen hans med saken å gjøre?’ [What’s his age got to do with it?]. But the doctor looks down at his notes, saying that he cannot tell him anything until he has studied the brain scans ‘some time during the course of the day’ (Frobenius 2011, 16). Thus the doctor remains non-committal, correctly offering neither unfounded promises nor estimations. But at the same time the doctor ignores the relative’s need for information. His unaccommodating attitude frustrates Emil:

‘Noe kan du vel si,’ fortsatte Emil utålmodig. ‘Kommer dere til å operere?’

Legen strøk hendene gjennom det gylne håret, skjøv det vekk slik at øyebrynene som tidligere hadde skjult seg under hårluggen, nå kom tydeligere til syne. Disse mørke og uvanlig tett sammenvokste øyebrynene ga den unge legen et anstrøk av utvilsom maskulin autoritet, som Emil først ikke hadde lagt merke til. Et øyeblikk virket det som om legen ville bekrefte spørsmålet, eller muligens avkrefte det, men så kikket han som ved en innskytelse til siden, inn på rommet hvor Viktor lå utstrakt, som livløs, på sengen, og straks ombestemte han seg:

‘Som sagt: Vi vet ikke ennå,’ sa han, og nå hadde blikket hans fått noe kjølig og desinteressert over seg.

‘Er det ...,’ begynte Emil og kjente at stemmen skalv av opphisselse. ‘Er det livstruende?’

Et nedlatende lite smil, som den unge legen selv sikkert regnet for å være omsorgsfullt, trakk over leppene hans.

‘Ethvert hjerneslag er alvorlig, særlig i hans alder. Vi får bare vente og se. Dessverre er det ikke mer jeg kan si til deg nå. Jeg har andre pasienter ...,’ sa han og begynte å gå nedover korridoren.

‘Hei! Jeg er ikke ferdig. Jeg har flere spørsmål!’

Legen gikk uanfektet videre, treskoene klapret lett mot linoleumsdekket.

‘Han var også lege en gang!’ ropte Emil etter ham.

Den hvitkleddede snudde seg ikke.

‘Og dessuten elsker jeg den fyren!’

[‘Surely you can say something’ continued Emil impatiently. ‘Are you going to operate?’]

The doctor ran his fingers through his fair hair, pushing it aside so his eyebrows, previously hidden under his fringe, became clearly visible. His dark and unusually close-set eyebrows gave the young doctor an unmistakable touch of masculine authority that Emil had not noticed at first. For a moment it seemed that the doctor would answer affirmatively, or perhaps negatively, but then, as if by impulse, he glanced into the room where Viktor lay stretched out and apparently lifeless on the bed, and immediately changed his mind:

‘As I said: we don’t know yet,’ he said, and now his expression had acquired a cool indifference.

‘Is it ...’ Emil began, and felt his voice shake with agitation. ‘Is it life-threatening?’

An overbearing smile, which perhaps was intended to be consolatory, passed over the young doctor’s lips.

‘Every stroke is serious, particularly at his age. We’ll have to wait and see. I’m afraid there’s nothing more I can say to you now. I have other patients...’ he said and began walking off down the corridor.

‘Hoi! I’m not finished yet. I have more questions!’

The doctor continued down the corridor without responding, his wooden clogs clattering lightly on the linoleum floor.

‘He was a doctor too once!’ Emil shouted after him.

The white-clad figure didn’t turn.

‘And besides, I love him that man!’

*(Frobenius 2011, 16–17).*

Viktor's collapse becomes his son's crisis as well as his own. After the introductory chapter in which the main crisis is initiated, we are presented with background information that tells us more about who Viktor is, what sort of life he has lived and still lives, what a complex man he was and is – none of which the doctor Erik Velland shows any understanding of or respect for in his clichés about 'at his age' and his banalities about having other patients – an understandable reaction seen from the perspective of a doctor who must prioritise and relate rationally to every case, but still not a respectful way to deal with patients and relatives.

During his first night at the hospital, Viktor doesn't wake up and Emil is sent home in the early morning. But it occurs to him: 'Jeg gikk fra sykehuset før han våknet og forlot ham der, og det streifet meg ikke at han ikke ville like å våkne alene og ikke vite hvor han var. Hvorfor hadde han gjort det? Betraktet han allerede faren som død?' [I left the hospital before he woke and left him there, and it didn't occur to me that he wouldn't like waking up alone, not knowing where he was. Why had he done it? Did he regard his father as dead already?] (Frobenius 2011, 34). Emil shows and feels great solicitude, returning to the hospital at around twelve o'clock to sit and watch his sleeping father. It is Sunday. No doctors are on duty. Nobody knows anything. Nothing is happening. Emil wonders and waits, wanting and expecting something to happen. After all, his father is in hospital. 'De så på ham og smilte og ristet på hodet. Ingen visste noe som helst. Ingen plan var lagt. Alle ventet på resultatene. "Skal dere operere?" "Det er søndag," sa sykepleierne' [They looked at him, smiled and shook their heads. Nobody knew anything at all. There was no plan. Everybody was waiting for the results. 'Are you going to operate?' 'It's Sunday,' said the nurses] (Frobenius 2011, 37). On Sundays only the most prioritised and necessary tasks are done. By choosing Sunday, Frobenius underlines how Emil has to wait for something to happen to his non-prioritised old father. Emil sees this low priority as being related to his father's age. But it could also be interpreted positively – according to the hospital's assessment, waiting until Monday will have no negative consequences for his father's health.

## THE DEMAND FOR ACTIVITY AND IMPROVEMENT

Throughout our lives we are accustomed to recovering from illness, to always being on the way somewhere, to always having the possibility of improvement. But when does that stop? When progression is what you are used to and expect, regression can be existentially difficult to tackle, even though everyone knows it is part

of the ageing process. What does regression do to a person? ‘Nå går jeg like bra som før’ [Now I’m walking as well as before] says Viktor happily when recovering from his stroke (Frobenius 2011, 71). One inevitably compares one’s present condition to what one could do before. But everyone reaches a point in life where one can no longer do everything one could before. As Runar Bakken points out, the existential space we relate to is defined by prejudices and barriers. As we mentioned before, Foucault calls this ‘the order of things’ (1996), referring to that which is so taken for granted that it first becomes apparent to us when we step out of one order and enter another. In old age it is particularly in relation to health that barriers are broken down: ‘Kroppens aldring innebærer en gradvis reise tilbake til det grenseløse’ [Physical ageing involves a gradual movement back to boundlessness] (Bakken 2014, 28). An old person gradually loses the ability to maintain the order of things. Bakken emphasises that this can apply both to the old person’s body and to his or her immediate environment (2014, 27), but it can more precisely be said to apply to *everything* concerning the physical, cognitive and social spheres.

Viktor starts by wanting to remain the way he was, but shifts to not caring, not wanting things at all: His son, who wants his father to get well, says ‘Du skal trene. Spise godt. Hvile’ [You must exercise. Eat well. Rest]. Viktor answers ‘Why?’, before adding:

‘Jeg vet ikke om jeg vil bli frisk. Jeg har ikke lyst til å være en frisk gamling som alle nikker og smiler til som om jeg var et barn. En gammel friskus. Det er motbydelig. Jeg er ingen dokke dere kan plukke opp og kikke på og slenge fra dere igjen. Ikke noe leketøy. Jeg vil ikke repareres. Rehabiliteres. Jeg vil ikke være sånn.’ ‘Du prater tull.’ ‘Der har du det igjen,’ spyttet Viktor. ‘Du snakker til meg som om jeg var en snørrunge. Som om mine synspunkter ikke kan illegges noen særlig vekt.’

[I’m not sure I want to get well. I don’t want to be the healthy oldie that everyone nods and smiles to as if he were a child. The old trooper. It’s disgusting. I’m not a doll that you can pick up and look at and then throw away again. I’m not a toy. I don’t want to be repaired. Rehabilitated. I don’t want to be like that. ‘You’re talking nonsense.’ ‘There you go again,’ Viktor snarled. ‘You talk to me as if I were a brat. As if my points of view don’t deserve to be listened to.’

(Frobenius 2011, 126)

Viktor is in rebellion, he doesn't want to get well just so he won't be a nuisance to his son. He already feels awful and wants to choose his own way of being so: 'Det er så mange som vil bestemme hvilken måte jeg skal føle meg elendig på. Sykepleierne, legene, hjemmesykepleierne, deg' [Lots of people want to decide the way I should feel awful. The nurses, the doctors, the community nurses, you] (Frobenius 2011, 127). Viktor is home from hospital after a heart attack, and his rebellion comes when his son takes him for a week's stay at Godthaab rehabilitation centre in Bærum. At Godthaab, Viktor behaves quite unlike the responsible and healthy person that the novel has depicted as preceding the decrepit, ageing Viktor. He breaks all the rules at Godthaab: he smokes indoors, he gets drunk, he flirts inappropriately with the staff. The administrator's account of what happened doesn't sound like something Viktor would do, Emil thinks (2011, 125). But then Emil knows Viktor primarily as a father. Moreover, Viktor's behaviour can be interpreted as a rejection of society's and his family's attempt to make him what he was before, and also as a sign that Viktor has accepted his new situation and now sees life differently. Thus he doesn't see the point of rehabilitation, training and activities deemed by others to be healthy and sensible.

Breiteig's Leif, who is trying to avoid the ritual farewell that marks and emotionalises his transition to retirement, also shows signs of having accepted his situation, as he turns the shower up to the red and feels his skin being gradually numbed by the heat and a comfortable quivering spreading through his body. 'Det var som om dampen hyllet et slør omkring ham, en kokong som stadig ble spunnet tykkere. Det gjorde ikke lenger noe at det var over, at det var i ferd med å gli bort fra ham, det lille han hadde klamret seg til i alle disse årene. Det var helt greit' [It was as if the steam enveloped him in a veil, a cocoon that was being spun ever thicker. It didn't matter anymore that it was over, that it was about to slip away from him, the little he'd clung to through all these years. It was okay.] (Breiteig 2000, 32). At the moment when he seems to be accepting the situation, he falls. (2000, 33). Perhaps it is the heat, his back or his body. But it could also be the situation, or both, that cause him to fall. Self-reconciliation and acceptance can be satisfactory ways of dealing with retirement and ageing. Accepting a situation can help to make it more dignified. But even so, it is a complex upheaval and termination that each individual will tackle in their own way and that can never be unambiguously simple and dignified. Becoming a pensioner means that a large part of life is over forever. That can result in a feeling of both freedom and emptiness.

Emil calls rehabilitation institutions 'eldreomsorgens krem' [the cream of geriatric care], while he compares nursing homes with rancid butter. At Godthaab, his

father is ‘innlemmet i en privilegert, døsigg omsorg som ville rense ham – for et eller annet – og sende ham ut igjen i samfunnet som en veltilpasset eldre person’ [included in a privileged, drowsy care that aims to cleanse him – of something or other – and send him back into society as a well adjusted old person] (Frobenius 2011, 127). Viktor is confronted with the demand to get well again and the belief that activity always leads to something good. When we get old and seriously ill, we are especially confronted with three perspectives formulated by geriatrician Peter F. Hjort: *the eternity perspective* (‘I’ll never be well again’), *the dependence perspective* (‘I’ll be dependent on the help of others’) and *the outsider perspective* (‘I’ll be excluded from the wider (healthy) community’) (Hjort 2010, 24–25). Then activity can be a suitable remedial measure. However, a demand for activity can also be experienced as a personal infringement or a mistake (Bakken 2014, 130; Bakken 2015).

The demand for, or expectation of, activity touches on a central problem, predicated as it is on the notion that improvement is expected and desired, and thus that activity is positive. But when does it stop being so, and who is to decide? The question of who decides has implications for the old person’s degree of dignity. We all want to be self-reliant and independent, we want to decide over our lives. Indeed, it is something demanded by society. ‘Målet om å bo hjemme til tross for stor hjelpeløshet, er blitt et mantra i eldreomsorgen. Det er selvfølgelig sterke økonomiske incentiver til dette’ [The aim of living at home has become a mantra in geriatric care. Of course, there are strong economic incentives for this] says Ildri Kjørseth (2014, 29). Throughout the 1980s and 90s there was an increased emphasis on rehabilitation. The old and infirm were to be given training, even where the potential for improvement was small. So-called activity theory, developed during the 1960s, helped to consolidate this view (Tornstam 1994; Kjørseth 2014, 29). The claim of activity theorists that a good old age implies and presupposes activity has influenced attitudes to geriatric care, as well as old people’s attitudes to themselves (Kjørseth 2014, 29). But Viktor refuses to conform. After three days his son receives a call from the medical administrator. Viktor has been smoking, drinking, flirting and making sexual advances on several young female members of staff. Now he has gone home in a taxi. At home his son finds him together with a friend, drinking and enjoying some jazz. They drink a toast to old age and want to live, preferring to enjoy it as best they can rather than desperately counteract regression with training and a healthy lifestyle (Frobenius 2011, 129–133). This is their rebellion both against what the welfare state has to offer and against the son’s well meant, but perhaps also selfish, efforts and exertions.

## SOCIETY'S NO-WIN PROJECTS

Viktor's name implies victory. Much of what Viktor has achieved in life, like his son, his work and his career, can be seen as victories. But in old age and infirmity there is not much left of the stereotypically victorious. For every victory there is generally a defeat for someone else. In fact, Viktor survives through the whole novel and in a sense is victorious every time Emil and the reader thinks his number has come up. The novel is thus an alternative contribution to the debate in general as well as to the critical article that Frobenius himself wrote in *Aftenposten* on 20<sup>th</sup> February 2006, before the novel was published, an article that is actually included in the novel (see Frobenius 2011, 156–159). However, in the novel the article has been somewhat revised. For example, the real father is 92 years of age in the newspaper article, not 84–85, as in the novel. The real article and the one in the novel illustrate the autobiographical background of the novel. In the novel, Frobenius portrays an old man who is still alive, still requiring dignity in his life situation and treatment. Thus the novel is an extension or a literary continuation of the article. Its agenda leaves an imprint on the novel, as in the scene where Emil hears an item on the radio and reflects over the position of old people in pre-modern as compared to modern society (see Frobenius 2011, 141–142). The novel obviously shows more sides of the issue than the article, and it shows us human vulnerability. In that way, it is an essential source of insight into and knowledge about the aged and their next of kin. However, the insistence of the novel makes it overly normative, moralising, explanatory and politicised. In some passages complex situations and issues are simplified, undermining the power of the novel. With a less visible agenda, the potential for cognitive engagement with the novel would have been greater.

‘Having honor means being entitled to respect’, Appiah claims (2010, 175). But being entitled to respect doesn't necessarily mean one will be treated, or feel one is treated, with respect. To discover whether a society has an honour problem, we must, according to Appiah, first find out whether and to what extent people in that society *believe* that the individual has the right to be treated with respect. The next step is to find out whether the right to respect is granted on the basis of a set of norms, i.e. a form of honour code. ‘An honor code says how people of certain identities can gain the right to respect, how they can lose it, and how having and losing honor changes the way they should be treated [...] Find a society with a code that assigns rights to respect of either kind, and you have found honor’, hevdre Appiah (2010, 175–176). There are many forms of respect, but one of the forms that has a bearing on honour is esteem. ‘One sort of respect that matters involves having a *positive regard* for someone because of their success in meeting

certain standards. We can term this *esteem*. We esteem people who are good at all kinds of things, from skydiving to poetry' (Appiah 2010, 175). But esteem is not necessarily linked to any form of success. Not being able to manage on one's own can undermine a person's self-esteem if it is experienced as degrading or as a loss of freedom. Both Leif and Viktor experience a loss of the esteem they previously achieved through their work.

Another form of respect that has a bearing on a person's honour is what Appiah calls 'recognition respect', the respect one achieves through recognition by virtue of one's position (Appiah 2010, 176). As a being well regarded doctor Viktor enjoyed a high level of respect and honour. For example, his son realises how well liked his father was as a doctor when they meet one of his former patients: 'Jeg vet ikke hva jeg skulle ha gjort uten deg, doktor Uvdal, [...] Jeg er deg evig takknemlig, rett og slett.' Damen tok enda et skritt nærmere Viktor, gikk opp på tå og kysset ham på kinnet' [I don't know what I would have done without you, Dr Uvdal, [...] I'm simply eternally grateful to you.] The woman took another step towards Viktor, stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek] (Frobenius 2011, 105–106). The novel portrays Viktor in the past, drawing particularly on things relating to his career. Unlike Leif, who claims only to have his chair waiting for him when he retires, Viktor wrote teaching books and articles and had his own column in a Saturday paper when he ceased receiving patients (2011, 106). 'Han virket fornøyd med tilværelsen som pensjonist med hjemmekontor, kanskje var dette den beste perioden i livet hans' [He seemed happy with life as a pensioner with his own office at home, perhaps it was the best period of his life] (Frobenius 2011, 106–107). *Expressed* esteem may have been reduced when Viktor finished working as a practising doctor, but age itself has not necessarily had an impact on his esteem and honour. Viktor's case illustrates how this changes, at least in the eyes of public authorities, when Viktor becomes sick and in need of care. Then age becomes a significant variable. In a sense, it is strategically advantageous for this project that Viktor is a former doctor. His previous status makes it easier for his son, and for the novel, to point out the respect and treatment Viktor is entitled to as an individual. Moreover, his status as a doctor makes it easier to see the fall that Viktor experiences from when he retires to when the debilitating processes and illnesses of old age finally catch up with him. But Viktor's story underlines that it is first and foremost his illness and his need for care that determines his price tag. Thus society's structural organisation influences and governs the view of humanity that pertains within public enterprises like the health service.

Age is a crucial variable for whether society can or should invest in providing the best treatment. When Viktor becomes ill, his age becomes a problem – a no-win

project that society cannot prioritise. A home help, some rehabilitation and a short stay in care are all that can be expected. A longer stay in care is only granted when someone is dying. But can and should the welfare state provide long-term care for old people who could manage at home? From a social perspective, gathering well-functioning old people under a regime of good care could in theory be a success, opening for some constructive and creative challenges. But in reality it would just be a form of ghettoisation of the old and regarded as a loss of freedom and a regimentation, as well as a waste of resources on individuals who can manage in their own homes. There would always be problems finding one solution to the question of what the care should consist of, for whom it is intended and from what time. Differentiation would no doubt be required to facilitate flexible solutions.

Appiah underlines that gender is not irrelevant here, adding: ‘Class matters very often, too’ (2010, 62).<sup>4</sup> Appiah points out also the ‘the tight connection between honor and birth’ (2010, 185). Everyone’s external honour will be influenced by who one is, irrespective of age. Gender and class, but also age and health are variables influencing an individual’s status, and therefore the honour and respect he or she is accorded. The class perspective links the concept of honour more strongly to status and reputation than to respect and dignity (cf. Welsh 2008, ix). Possible class differences therefore play a secondary role when we look at the honour concept as related to old people. However, as a man and as a doctor, Frobenius’s character Viktor does enjoy high social status and class.

Breiteig’s character Leif is also male, but compared with Viktor his profession as an ironworker counts for less in the honour stakes. However, ‘respect isn’t always connected to hierarchy’ (Appiah 2010, 185), as both Leif’s and Viktor’s stories show. The debilitation of old age affects the honour of every individual, both the honour accorded by others and the sense of honour one carries within oneself. An old person, especially a sick one, is placed outside his or her usual setting and role, and is gradually rendered inactive. As we see in Viktor’s case, the greatest impact is from the debilitation arising from age and infirmity. Neither class, gender nor health can compensate for the consequences of ageing. Increasing age is the crucial factor as honour and esteem are inevitably impaired and adjusted over time.

The title *Så høyt var du elsket* refers to the Gospel of John 3,16 which begins ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only son’. Viktor *is* still loved by his

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4. In a book I am working on concerning the aged in contemporary Norwegian literature, I investigate possible gender differences. In the material both genders are represented, both among the authors and the fictional characters, but there is a slight majority of women (13 fictional women and 12 female authors against 11 fictional men and 10 male authors).

son. But the title reminds us of Viktor's vanity, of the fact that he will soon belong in the past and that he was 'loved' by society, in the sense of 'valued', while he was still a practising doctor and a resource for the community. The same applies to Leif. As pensioners they are in need of the services society has to offer without necessarily being able to give anything back – they are reduced to individuals it is not worth investing in. They have become a no-win project for society. According to Appiah, your value is determined by your contribution (Appiah 2010, 175). Viktor particularly goes from being the ideal old person to being overtaken by illness and exposed to ageism. However, there are limits to what the welfare state can help an old person with – and it depends, not least, on there being enough people willing to work in the field of geriatric care. As Bakken points out, there are limits to everything, including how much money society can spend on the aged. There are also limits to how much family and volunteers can contribute (Bakken 2014, 139). But what limits can we and should we set while at the same time ensuring the conditions for a dignified old age? And who can and should decide which limits and judgements are reasonable?

### THE AFFORDANCE OF OLD AGE

Social inequality, class and gender are variables which particularly influence how old age is experienced and how it develops (Bakken 2014, 71). Viktor and Leif are of the same gender, but from two different classes, demonstrated first and foremost by their differing professions as a doctor and an ironworker. Our prejudices are partly confirmed in the classic stereotypes of the two literary works – Leif is simply a worker and finds no meaning or other identity beyond his work, which, although he himself characterises it as a crappy job (cf. Breiteig 2000, 29), is what he lives for. As a pensioner he becomes an outsider, in contrast to the energetic worker he once was. Like an ant Leif participates reliably and diligently in society, following orders and instructions. Viktor acquires a new role when he becomes ill. Where he was formerly active and conspicuous, he now becomes neither recognised nor reckoned with; he doesn't receive the treatment at least his son thinks he is entitled to and in need of. He is left to his own devices and under his son's supervision until he is so poorly that palliative care is all the health services can offer. The person Viktor becomes and the role he is given as a sick old man stands in stark contrast to the active and attractive doctor.

Nature runs its course and all organic life disintegrates sooner or later. If you don't die early, you will die of old age, and, regardless of what the welfare state or the family can offer in terms of public or private services, old age cannot only be

a positive experience (Bakken 2014, 137–139). The older we get, the greater the discrepancy between our actual age and our experience of it, a process that starts as early as in our thirties (Daatland & Solem 2011). In *La Vieillesse* (The Coming of Age, 1970) Simone de Beauvoir philosophises over the individual's fear of death. Bakken links this fear to the idea of what he calls 'the second childhood' (Bakken 2014, 67). Drawing on studies by Cowgill and Holmes from 1972, he argues that the status and prestige of old people declines concurrently with the modernisation of capitalist society. In a more stable pre-modern society, old age was at some point a golden age<sup>5</sup> compared with old age in today's society, where it is all the more apparent how alienated and outdated an old person becomes when (s)he quits regular employment. In a society in constant change, the old person is no longer the fount of wisdom or experience in most fields as knowledge, experiences and skills become out of date. '[G]amle mennesker blir derfor velferdsstatens passive og tilsidesatte mottakere av sosial og økonomisk trygghet' [Thus old people become the welfare state's passive and neglected recipients of social and economic welfare] (Bakken 2014, 69; cf. Cowgill and Holmes 1972; Cowgill 1986). To relate this to actual figures from our own times, according to the Norwegian Senior Policy Barometer 2016, 59% of employees over 60 would like to carry on working after they are entitled to a pension. Some factors are especially important for those over 62 who want to continue working. These factors relate to benefits that are to a large extent lost as soon as one retires.

- That there is a good working environment (96%)
- That the work gives increased quality of life (92%).
- That the work is interesting (92%).
- That one has good colleagues (91%).
- That the job helps me feel useful for society (91%).

By comparison only 63% answered that a good salary would be decisive for whether they wanted to continue working.

In a study from 1986, Cowgill compares conditions for the old in pre-modern and industrialised countries, where retirement and ending up in a nursing home is regarded as a social substitute for death and ageism, i.e. age discrimination (cf. Cowgill 1986; Bakken 2014, 69). Viktor and Leif are affected by ageism in differ-

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5. But only up to a certain point, of course. There are limits for everything, and in pre-modern times there were some tribal societies where it was common to kill old people, directly or indirectly, as soon as they could no longer contribute in any way but just became an extra mouth to feed. (see Bakken 2014, 34–35).

ent ways. Cowgill argues that age research can promote values that improve the status and role of older people, thus helping to reverse the destruction of social attitudes to the aged and their treatment brought about by modernisation. In same way, I would argue that literary texts can show us both a diversity of old people and a number of pressing issues associated with ageing. The awareness and exemplification that literature can create, can lead to an increase in the status and importance of old people and thus also in the dignity with which they are treated. By making old people visible and arousing sympathy for them, literature can maintain or re-establish some of the honour and dignity that is inevitably undermined when debilitation sets in. The empathy activated by exemplifying old people's vulnerability can foster understanding and respect for the aged. Martha Nussbaum has constantly argued that 'certain moral truths are best expressed in the form of a story' (cf. Aviv 2016). As solicitous and empathetic readers, we understand a human life as 'a complex narrative of human effort in a world full of obstacles' (Aviv 2016). In the words of Anne Marie Mai, literature is 'et virtuelt eksperimenterium, hvor læseren kan leve sig ind i sine egne og sine medmenneskers indre og ydre vilkår og omstændigheder – også dem man ikke på forhånd har nogen anelse om' [a virtual experimentarium where readers can identify with their own and their fellow human beings' inner and outward conditions and circumstances – including those one has no prior knowledge of] (Mai et al. 2016, 11). Literature invites identification, as well as confrontation with, the unknown and the alien. In this way it can increase our understanding and insight, equipping and preparing us in our personal relationships, but also in our social and political relations. However, good literature doesn't present easy answers and simple messages. As the Danish poet Klaus Høeck puts it, it is 'neither true nor false', it is the art of words (cf. Mai et al. 2016, 11). Thus literary texts can widen our horizons, present new and different perspectives.

According to Unni Langås, 'Tekster som tematiserer traumeskapende hendelser, har gjerne et reparerende perspektiv og kan gi ideer til sosiale og politiske handlemåter' [Texts that deal with traumatic experiences often have an ameliorative perspective and can provide ideas for social and political courses of action] (2015, 12). The transition to retirement, and other upheavals that inevitably occur on entry into the third and fourth ages (i.e. at around 65 and 80, respectively, cf. Hjort 2010, 17), can be traumatic experiences for the old person as well as for their next of kin. The word trauma comes from a Greek work meaning 'wound', and etymologically the word can refer to both a wounded body and a wounded mind. According to Collins English Dictionary, a trauma means 1. a powerful shock that may have long-lasting effects and/or 2. any bodily injury or wound. In a modern

context, Langås stresses that a traumatised person is primarily mentally wounded, although physiological and psychological wounds can of course be connected (Langås 2015, [19]). Physical debilitation due to ageing can, for example, cause a trauma if the experience of no longer being able to function, or master what one was previously able to master, is felt to be degrading. The trauma is heightened by the fact that the experience is irreversible. Under normal circumstances, most people become accustomed to constant development, becoming cleverer, safer, better, recovering from illness. It is therefore distressing to experience regression and debilitation instead – even though we all know that this process of winding down and termination is inevitable for all those who achieve an advanced age. Paradoxically, it is something we are supposed to be, and generally are, grateful for.

According to Dag Solstad, literature ages more quickly than other art forms (Hagen 2016, 22). It seems a reasonable assertion, and should be seen in the context of language being in constant development. Literary taste, too, undergoes constant change and influence, as does literary style, fashion and tendency. In this project and this article I have wanted to show how the ageing individual is understood, experienced, treated and portrayed in our society, taking portrayals of the aged in contemporary Norwegian literature as my starting point. However, in spite of the fact that Norwegian welfare society both exacerbates and ameliorates certain aspects of growing old, I would at the same time claim that issues and destinies depicted in our contemporary literature about the aged are not new, but universal and timeless. In her work *La Vieillesse*, Simone de Beauvoir claims that old people are not suitable as the heroes of novels: '[I]f an old man is dealt with in his subjective aspect he is not a good hero for a novel; he is finished, set, with no hope, no development to be looked for' (Beauvoir [1970] 1996, 210). This claim doesn't hold up, neither for today's old people nor the old people portrayed in contemporary literature – it is one-sided and oversimplified. The case is rather that the literature of ageing problematises existential issues that are of general interest, and that demonstrates that ageing doesn't render the human being any less of a human being.

But does the welfare state allow the old person to be fully a human being? I will finish this article by proposing that we don't live in a 'post-honour society'. Particularly in literature that portrays people in the final phase of life, we see how honour is socially rooted and how certain forms of honour cannot be eliminated if we are to experience the last phase of life as dignified and meaningful: the affordance of life in old age. What possibilities and limitations does old age present? In many contexts the individual is reliant on social services that can present both possibilities and limitations. But the ageing individual also has a responsibility.

Appiah points out, for example, how ‘circumstances that one might assume would be merely impediments may be transformed into a positive way of being’ (Appiah 2005, 112). Appiah uses the example of the deaf person who can choose that ‘deafness is not a limit but a parameter’. It is not about ‘trying to overcome a disability’, but rather ‘trying to live successful lives as the hard-of-hearing people that they are. A condition becomes an identity’ (Appiah 2005, 112). Here Appiah touches on a challenge that is relevant to both the ageing individual and the society he or she is part of: how to work continually to create dignified and meaningful experiences of old age.

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