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## To Age With Honour

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Simonsen, Peter

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## To Age With Honour

### *Charlotte Strandgaard's Welfare State Poetry of Ageing in No Man's Land*

**PETER SIMONSEN**

**ABSTRACT** This article provides a reading of Charlotte Strandgaard's collection of poetry, *No Man's Land* (2015), as a piece of Danish welfare state poetry. This collection of poetry articulates certain anxieties associated with maintaining one's honour as an elderly woman in the contemporary welfare state that embraces economic values of speed, efficiency, growth and (re)productivity. In the welfare state the elderly are kept out of traditional functions. In a utilitarian sense, they feel useless, and it becomes difficult to 'age with honour' in the sense of maintaining their sense of dignity as an effect of maintaining their personal autonomy.

**KEY WORDS** values | old age | autonomy/subjectivity | honour | welfare state

The welfare states and welfare societies that emerged in many western nations in the course of the twentieth century and especially since World War 2 have all had as one of their central goals to secure the well-being of the elderly citizen through state financed or subsidized health care, various services and pensions. As a consequence, especially in the Scandinavian countries, more elderly people live longer and better, more dignified and socially secure lives than ever before in history. While this has been called a 'triumph of civilization' (Petersen 2008), in one sense, insofar as many are able to live 'lifelong lives' (Simonsen 2014) of self-realization, continued personal development and are free to engage in stimulating and meaningful interpersonal relations, to begin new lives and careers in the third age, in another sense it confronts us with some of our worst fears of disease, disability, social exclusion and 'social death' (Sudnow 1967).

Indeed, many literary writers are skeptical of the extent to which the welfare state has lived up to its own goals of securing the good, dignified life into deep old age through substituting and compensating for the care functions carried out by the family in traditional societies through processes of ‘defamiliarization’ (Esping-Andersen 1990). To the extent that we inhabit and can look forward to inhabiting a ‘senile modernity’ – a societal epoch which will be defined by the fact that more and more people will be older and live with an increasing amount of illnesses in what has been called the ‘remission society’ (Frank 1995) – we can look forward to inhabiting a society where we are all patients in recovery, being kept alive much longer than any previous societal forms have known, both through the health system and by virtue of the ways in which our lifestyles and life courses are regulated in ways that make us healthier and less ill during the life course. That optimize us biopolitically and make us capable of remaining autonomous, productive subjects almost all the way to the end. The welfare state keeps the elderly alive, but despite rising mandatory retirement age that reflects increasing life expectancy even as it produces new forms of inequality, it keeps them out of traditional functions where they could help and be helped in the local community or family and thus renders them, in a utilitarian sense, useless (Bakken 2014). This makes it difficult for many to feel that they can ‘age with honour’ in the sense of maintaining their sense of dignity as an effect of maintaining their personal autonomy.

By the phrase ‘to age with honour’ I mean living as aged, frail and more or less dependent person without feeling useless and superfluous the way many elderly individuals in modern societies have felt as their age-acquired skills and knowledge has been rendered obsolete with increasing speed (De Beauvoir 1970) and they have been left to pursue their own life goals not necessarily with others’ needs and ‘the common good’ in mind (Lasch 1979). Indeed, a major life goal for elderly in western consumer societies has become that of avoiding ageing in the sense of bodily, molecular and cellular decay in order to stay young as long as possible through healthy lifestyle, plastic surgery, etc. (Bauman 2007). In a world where you are expected to act and look young even though you are old, and where there are few if any things you can do or say to make yourself useful and needed, ageing with honour can indeed be increasingly difficult if not outright impossible and as such a negative source of anxiety and stress, both actually experienced and anticipated.

Literary works of art are increasingly forcing us to confront and to think about these paradoxes and to attune our emotional registers towards life in senile modernity. As this essay aims to show through a close reading of a single, singular work,

literary works provide ways for us to imagine and model new forms of subjectivity both for ourselves and for those we care about. This article 1) introduces Danish writer Charlotte Strandgaard as a quintessential welfare state author, 2) identifies early but persistent themes of motherhood and bodily autonomy and stylistic traits of repetition and everyday diction, and 3) provides a reading of her 2015 collection of poetry, *No Man's Land*, as a piece of welfare state poetry (Simonsen 2015) that articulates certain anxieties associated with maintaining one's honour as an elderly woman in the contemporary welfare state that embraces economic values of speed, efficiency, growth and (re)productivity.

### CHARLOTTE STRANDGAARD AS AUTHOR OF THE WELFARE STATE

Charlotte Strandgaard (born 1943) is a writer who has carried her youthful lifestyle and values into old age but at the same time searches for something that will make her feel useful as a member of the modern technologized, mediatized and 'defamiliarized' society; something that will bestow upon her a sense of honour ('honour' here seems an archaic term that she does not use herself but that nonetheless is an appropriate appellation given the position at which I suggest she arrives at the end of *No Man's Land*). Strandgaard's work and career has in many ways been doing what literature has typically done in the Danish welfare state in terms of interacting with reading audiences to offer both criticism of the given and ideas for renewal, ideas for doing things and organizing social life in other, new and perhaps better ways (Mai 2013). And she has found numerous readers from her debut in 1965 to the present in her many texts, films, plays, and public appearances.

Strandgaard's work exemplifies literature's three main functions as welfare literature: it criticizes conditions for the weak and socially excluded in the welfare state by giving voice and being to the powerless and voiceless. It reports on and documents new, potential life forms, ideas and social rituals and discourses as they emerge in the welfare state. And it suggests other ways of living, thinking and feeling in the welfare state, other ways of pursuing social formations. Her work has followed a certain trajectory that makes her exemplary as author of the welfare state and cultural activist, but has also made it difficult for Danish literary critics and historians to understand and appreciate what she has been up to (yet see Mai and Borup 1999, 91–108). We have no problems categorizing and studying the poetry from the 1960s as experimental literary art (more in section 2 below). Her work from 1969, *Indimellem holder de af hinanden* (Now and then they care for one another) was recently republished to great critical acclaim, yet having pub-

lished this groundbreaking work (the first so-called ‘punktroman’ – a fragmentary novel the reader must work to re-construct the flow and meaning of) in Danish literature, she abandoned this line of focused aesthetic work and in the 1970s began to experiment with mixing a more socially critical and personally confessional poetry and social commentary in ways not appreciated by critics with a more narrow understanding of ‘the literary’.

In *Gade op og gade ned* (1973) (*Up and Down the Street*), for instance, she presents a series of short prose witness accounts of female alcoholics and drug addicts who tell their story in a treatment facility where they are being rehabilitated. They talk about life as addict as woman and mother in very frank and revealing ways. They talk about problems with buying alcohol, where to hide it at home, how the kids suffer, the sex life, etc. in the form of nitty gritty social realistic reportage. Each such factual prose account is seamlessly concluded by a short free verse poem that interprets and sums up the given woman’s life situation enabling us as readers to better enter such a subjectivity.

In the 1980s and onwards Strandgaard started to write e.g. educational books for nurses and families in crises as well as self-help books for the aged children of really old parents along with a series of social realist novels dealing with the social problems not solved by and sometimes even produced by the welfare state. These novels have a deep social-critical bent and as such by many academic critics automatically judged of dubious status to the extent that they tend towards the programmatic and too explicit. Yet to understand and appreciate Strandgaard we must employ a concept of ‘literature’ that is open and inclusive of many text genres and media forms as well as rituals and activities, and we must be interested in studying the relations between ‘literature’ and ‘the social’ as mediated through acts of reading and interaction with the work that has as premise more than detached aesthetic pleasure and includes an urgent sense of attachment and identification with characters, topics, ideas, milieu and moods and subsequent ‘use’ of the literary text through an engagement with it, an application of it to concrete life experiences, actual and immediate as well as imagined and projected (Felski 2008).

Strandgaard’s work is in other words exemplary as ‘welfare state literature’. Such literature always runs the risk of becoming too opinionated, too engaged, and in that process in danger of losing its aesthetic/artistic value and becoming too transitive, too intent perhaps on solving things, on dissolving its artistry in the interest of usability, utility, usefulness as a means of e.g. forging or suggesting social transformation. However, we’re not dealing with a fixed and finite difference of kind between the transitive and intransitive, but with differences of degree contingent not least on the reader’s inclination or manner of meeting the given

work. Even at the height of literature's alleged abandonment of art for the greater good of the socialist revolution during the 1970s she acknowledged the complexity of the matter. In a 1977 interview on literature's social function she was asked: 'Do you believe it is the task of the author to show how the suppressed can liberate themselves from their yoke? Or do you believe it is enough for the author to portray the situation of the suppressed?' (Berg and Haavardsholm 1977, 113). Her response was that she has mainly done the latter even if she and others feel the attraction of the former; yet when *others* appear to think they've got it all figured, she says, it always sounds wrong and she admits to being put off when someone claims superior insight and instead prefers and wants to promote independent thinking in her literary activities (113–114). In 1979 she characteristically closes a book of socially critical and *engagé* poems, *Braendte børn* (Scorched children), by recommending a new orthography, a new way of rendering reality without capital letters to tell the history of those without history: children, women, disabled and other oppressed groups and races. She characteristically recommends this in the form of a question which is certainly rhetorical in that she thinks we should agree, but remains a question pointing ahead to a desire for transformation: 'Skal vi ikke begynde med den nye retskrivning?' 'Why don't we begin the new orthography?' (Strandgaard 1979, 118).

### STRANDGAARD'S WELFARE THEME AND STYLE

In a sense part of what's most distinct about Strandgaard's work, the tone and attitude that comes out in her work, seems to capture the tone and attitude of the welfare state. Because the welfare state was never all that 'poetic' or 'passionate' or 'suggestive' – never really suitable for poetic sensibility – but rather more prosaic, square, precise, planned and structured in an everyday manner. This also poses a challenge to traditional notions of honour and how to achieve honour in a modern welfare state. The welfare state's prosaic, and in a sense boring because planned rational reality is the reality and the tone and form of Strandgaard's most distinct work from the 1960s (dealing mostly with promises and paradoxes) and 70s (dealing with problems with social institutions, work conditions, unemployment, general sense of crisis). Her poetics is an everyday poetics, her voice is a prosaic, pedestrian and highly structured and planned voice that works through grammatical patterns of repetition and symmetry suggestive of the central planning and social engineering of the welfare state – and the proposed egalitarian orthography would seem to be in the spirit of the welfare state as a utopian desire for fully realized equality.

Having to choose between staying at home to take care of one's children and working out of the house to earn a wage is the subject of a poem from Strandgaard's second collection, *Afstande* (Distances) from 1966, and a central motif that unifies Strandgaard's work:

..... konklusionen var faktisk at man  
 måtte gøre sit valg og så resignere over  
 for de mange muligheder man måtte sige  
 nej til. Altså valgte man udeerhverv måtte  
 man gøre sig klart at andre kom til at på-  
 virke og passe ens børn og børnene ville  
 holde af andre end en selv.  
 Valgte man børnene måtte man finde  
 sig i at være henvist til børneværelset  
 i mange år af sit liv. Den sagde mig så  
 meget fordi jeg aldrig har gjort mig det  
 klart før .....

[..... actually the conclusion was that one  
 had to make a choice and then resign to the fact  
 of the many possibilities one had to  
 say no to. So if one chose to work away from home  
 one had to realise that others would af-  
 fect and take care of one's children and the children  
 would care for others than one self.  
 If one chose the children one had to accept  
 to be confined to the nursery  
 for many years of one's life. It told me so  
 much because I have never been  
 clear about it before .....

(Strandgaard 1966, np)

This prosaically phrased self-negotiation parses an everyday epiphany on behalf of this woman caught in a deep and unresolvable ambivalence. Irrespective of the choice made it seems to be clearly implied that there would be no sense of honour to be gained; the question of honour is in other words not raised. Note how the emotionally detached impersonal use of third person 'man'/'one' to articulate the paradox in a neutral, flat manner is made personal and subjective by the introduction of the first person perspective ('mig'/'me') in the end when 'the conclusion' finally registers with and this preeminent welfare state choice is brought home to her. The heavy use of punctuation in first and last line indicates that we're witnessing an epiphany that punctuates ordinary routine for this individual and that it's up

to the reader to keep thinking about how to handle this paradox. No big emotional outbursts find articulation, no apostrophe!, the emotion is rather marked as absent, but as such, certainly there. Aesthetically, the point of the poem is made by the breaking of the word ‘af-fect’ ‘på-virke’ across line end, calling attention to the word it makes us reflect on who and what affects and influences our children and perhaps suggests that there’s something wrong, something broken or ruptured, in the idea of someone else af-fecting one’s children?

Strandgaard debuted under the tutelage of the poet Vagn Steen as experimental lyric poet with great potential with the collection, *Katalog* (1965), (Catalogue), published by the famous Arena press. Consider her very first poem in her first collection, a real signature piece:

En enmandsseng  
til to  
ingen  
tandbørste  
og så problemet  
med at finde sit  
tøj igen

[A single bed  
for two  
no  
toothbrush  
and then the problem  
with finding your  
clothes again]

(*Strandgaard 1965, np*)

This poem is about autonomy, freedom and a life lived without ‘real’ problems in the sense of psychological-existential problems of the kind poetry was expected to deal with in 1960s Danish Modernism defined by e.g. Klaus Rifbjerg and Villy Sørensen and academically processed by Torben Brostrøm and others (Mai 2016). These writers and critics were attuned to existential problems of loss of coherence and meaning in the modern world and with feeling alienated from God and Nature and split from an authentic self. And they felt that this modern alienation and breakdown could be dealt with and healed through poetic metaphor and symbol, often in a form that was difficult for the ‘ordinary reader’. The modernists in other words tended to want to deal with existential and psychological questions which everyday life in the welfare state was simply too easy and socially secure to render pertinent (Kjældgaard 2011). Indeed, life lived and observed on the surface in the



welfare state had rendered that kind of soul-searching poetic sensibility something of an anachronism. Strandgaard's poetic universe is 'post honour' in the traditional sense and may illustrate James Bowman's sense that 'Honor can be made compatible with a great many seemingly antithetical ideas, but it can never be compatible with any serious degree of egalitarianism' of the kind that informs the Scandinavian welfare states and societies (Bowman 2006, 312). As I will suggest later, however, Bowman's idea that for honour to obtain again (he means 'bravery in men, chastity in women, loyalty and courtesy in both sexes' (313)) 'there would have to be a purging of the sense of egalitarian shame we have grown used to feeling at our natural sense of the honor of achievement' (312–313) is undermined by Strandgaard's latest poetry collection, which identifies a special honour in supporting an egalitarian support for the weakest in society.

Strandgaard's poetry in the 1960s is a concrete, minimalist poetry bereft of metaphor and 'depth' and instead focused on the present, the real, material surfaces of life. It is a poetry that wants to explore new life situations and opportunities, especially for young women. On the one hand, as here, she embraces a new independence and sensual promiscuity and carelessness. On the other hand, she tackles the everyday emotional consequences of being emancipated in the materialist, capitalist welfare state and feeling forced into but also eager to join the labour market that both constrains and enables her freedom even while she wants to live up to certain norms of motherhood that are hard to reconcile with working away from the home. The question of honour seems manifestly absent and to belong to the pre-modern world.

### **NO MAN'S LAND AS WELFARE STATE POETRY ABOUT OLD AGE AND HONOUR**

The poetic voice and style of the welfare state that Strandgaard developed in the 1960s is recaptured in the new poems published in *No Man's Land*. Only this time it is not the new life forms of young liberated women and mothers that are being poetically parsed. This time it's the new life forms and styles of the +70 grandmothers of the aged welfare state whose lives are being dealt with. 'No man's land' is both the grey, liminal zone between the living and the dead that old age can be experienced as where the elderly take up the position and value of 'bare life' (Agamben 2008): alive but with no voice and no actual rights, without anyone caring whether they live or die, and – literally – a female, feminine land of certain bodily and emotional experiences that males are denied access to. The main question behind the collection is of what use the increasingly elderly people on retirement can be in the contemporary welfare state exposed to neoliberal

retrenchment, cutbacks, and reforms? What's the use of the elderly in our present senile modernity? Is there or can there be any honour in old age in the welfare state or is the welfare state an example of our 'post-honor society' (Bowman 2006).

In a stunning poem Strandgaard alludes to her 1965 signature piece through the repetition of the two persons in a single bed motif, but much has changed:

### **ELSKER OG VEN**

Jeg har en elsker og ven. I over fyrre år, med pauser, har vi kneppet overalt i Danmark. Vi er gode til det. Hans pik passer, som hånd i handske, i min skede.

Vi ligger i min seng  
Vi knepper aldrig mere på gulvet  
Vi er udmattede og tilfredse  
Vi snakker om velfærdsstaten

Vi kender hinanden  
Vi holder fast i hinanden  
Vi har kun min seng for tiden  
Vi skal være forsigtige for ikke at falde ud af min enmandsseng

Vi skal snart op  
Vi skal have tøj på  
Vi skal drikke en kop te sammen  
Vi drikker ikke alkohol mere

Lige før forløsningen falder han på gulvet. Med megen møjje får vi hevet ham op. Jeg får selv krampe i venstre ben, lige før orgasmen. Vi flytter rundt på mine ben. Og så lykkes det endelig. Han mumler, at alderdommen ikke vinder ved nærmere bekendtskab.

### **[LOVER AND FRIEND**

I have a lover and friend. For more than forty years, on and off, we have fucked everywhere in Denmark. We are good at it. His cock suits my vagina, like a hand in a glove.

We lie in my bed  
We never fuck on the floor any longer  
We are exhausted and content  
We talk about the welfare state

We know one another

We hold on to one another  
 We only have my bed for the time being  
 We have to be careful not to fall from my single bed

We have to get up soon  
 We have to get dressed  
 We have to have a cup of the together  
 We never drink alcohol any longer

Just before deliverance he falls onto the floor. With much fuss we get him back again. I myself get cramps in my left leg again, just before the orgasm. We move my legs around. And then we succeed finally. He mumbles that old age does not improve upon closer inspection.]

(*Strandgaard 2015, 21*)

Most readers will be shocked by the frank and explicit imagery and tone of voice of this poem. Carnal copulation after a ‘certain age’ is not something the culture at large is at ease with choosing to believe in the stereotype of an asexual old age (Gott and Hincliff 2003). Shock, as Rita Felski puts it in *Uses of Literature*, is ‘symbolically central to contemporary literary studies’ (105) – certain kinds of transgressive taboo-breaking literature wants to shock us and change our ways of seeing and thinking about certain aspects of life. Literary texts such as this poem alter our emotional and cognitive grammars as they point us to new aspects of intimacy and sociality. Rhetorically, the poem does this by hitting us with the very blunt statement that his cock fits her vagina like a hand in a glove – one of the most tired, worn (!), used and abused clichés is here given a new life and significance.

The pronoun ‘we’ is emphasized. This is very much a we-poem, the pronoun is put in the initial place in every line in the three mid-stanzas: there is a very strong sense of togetherness, of union, coupling and copulation in this poem. It is a poem about basic trust and solidarity, about being both lover and friend and holding on to one another in a relation based in deep familiarity and ritual. While the poem eschews ‘poetic language’ and pretty metaphor, it still produces poetic meaning, e.g. through the use of line breaks to articulate its point, especially towards the end in the sexual climax, ‘Og så lykkes det / endelig’ (‘And then we succeed / finally’). The minimal suspense created by breaking the line and moving ‘endelig’ to a new line embodies the strain of achieving orgasm +70.

In terms of lying in bed and talking about the welfare state, one wonders what they are talking about? One gets the sense that Strandgaard is no longer as critical of the welfare state as she was in the 1970s, she leaves it open and we may even

sense an endeared tone here that recognizes, nostalgically and under the sign of something that has perhaps passed, that the welfare state has enabled their copulation, set them free to enjoy life in old age and inaugurated the norms they now embody: that it's ok to enjoy the good life also on retirement without a guilty conscience. Whether to read or translate 'tilfredse' as content or satisfied is a question that points us to this central word in the poem: 'satisfied' could restrict the meaning to post coital sexual gratification of a new kind compared to the earlier single bed poem. This couple knows where they left the clothes. If we read it as 'content' this broadens out the semantic field and signifies their entire life situation, summed up by their sexuality but also applying more generally: content because socially, materially secure (not existentially secure, though, old age is still not something that improves upon closer inspection)?

The couple in this poem is both satisfied and content, in part, because they don't have to fear the destiny of the post-productive and post-reproductive people in other, so-called traditional and primitive societies that practice (or have often been understood to practice) gerontocide: killing the elderly when they become a burden. In five short factual poems in *No Man's Land* such societies' ritualistic gerontocides are described in terse detail. The aged are thrown off cliffs, left on mountain tops, hanged, stabbed, etc. Implicitly the book thus compares such societies defined by a shortage of resources and forced lack of compassion with the present affluent welfare society defined by surplus and an ideology of solidarity that supports (with more or less success) and means to support (at least during election time) the weak and those in need. Yet the satisfied couple might also be talking about the dissolution of this society and its ideas of human worth and dignity which is indeed under pressure in society in general with potentially severe consequences for the elderly in dependent need of care (Bakken 2014).

The poems in *No Man's Land* are still anxious about the future use value of the old and fragile citizens in a world after the welfare state and want to think about being old as more than being able to have an active sex life and being able to enjoy life and feel 'content' about doing so. Elderly Strandgaard faces the same dilemma that she was faced with in the 1960s between being free and uninhibited (forgetting where she left her clothes before jumping into a single bed with a stranger) and feeling obliged both to work for a wage and to stay at home to take care of her child being unable to do both at once. Elderly Strandgaard is free and uninhibited but is torn between, on the one hand, being afraid of being killed off as useless either literally or symbolically by being treated as already dead and, on the other hand, struggling to find a use for herself in a world where she feels like a relic.

This is a struggle for honour in a ‘post-honour’ society; that is, for a new understanding of honour and what it might mean to age with honour.

The collection opens with a poem where the speaker asks why she never asked her mother about the good things about old age before considering two possible answers, either that what’s good about old age is blindness and deafness or that ‘Det er ikke så nemt at sætte ord på’ (‘It not so easy to find the proper words to describe’) (Strandgaard 2015, 9). Here the thematic field of the collection is outlined as a continued registering of the experience of bodily change and decline in old age and the difficult attempt to find the right words to attach to those experiences. One poem, ‘Gylden sommer’ (Golden Summer) indirectly registers her feelings of being useless through a blunder she makes when she mistakes an elderly man’s daughter for his granddaughter having forgotten men’s capacity to reproduce even in old age. In reply to her remark about how wonderful his grandchild is ‘Hans stemme er lav men rasende: “Det er min datter”’ (His voice is low but furious: ‘It’s my daughter’) to signal his own fear of ageing having been confirmed through this scene of being misrecognized and falsely categorized according to age. In the poem ‘Blod’ (Blood) we hear about the very different meanings of blood in a toilet for the 13-year-old (the relief of not being pregnant and the fear of pregnancy) and the 70-year-old (whose relief has to do with her deep fear of cancer indicated by excremental blood). All lines begin with the word ‘Jeg’ (‘I’) and suggests a fundamental continuity between the young and the aged at the level of language even as there are enormous differences in terms of the fears of reproduction versus illness. Or consider ‘Den strenge dommer’ (‘The harsh judge’) where the 70-year-old has gone swimming and looks at her daughter who has given birth three times and sees her own 70-year-old flat breasts no longer as a proud sign of having breast fed (as she did when she was her daughter’s age and flaunted them) but as a sign of bodily decline and something that makes her feel uneasy because she does not want to be judged by her looks even though that is exactly what she is doing. This life led in fear of illness and decline still has its positive moments of sexual gratification, as seen, but as mentioned (and in contrast to the image of male ageing in ‘Gylden sommer’) it seems to lack an ulterior purpose for living.

In the end, in the final and longest poem, ‘Magtesløs’ (Powerless) the collection carves out a use value for old, fragile women, and posits a reason for keeping them alive in society. This is a use value directed towards fellow women – stressed mothers of children with diagnoses – who suffer in the contemporary world where they have to be – but of course fail to be – both perfect workers, perfect mothers and perfect daughters to their childrens’ grandparents: roles they can’t live up to

and from which they suffer as a consequence. The poem describes the lives of the mothers of children with diagnoses and concludes with the speaker imagining herself +80 years old telling all these tired mothers across the whole world that they are united by their powerless love for their suffering children:

‘Vi er sammen i det her svære liv  
Vi slår ikke vores børn ihjel,  
selv om vi indimellem er nær ved det,  
jeg håber, at ingen hader os for det,  
for det har de ingen ret til’

Det er det, jeg skal fortælle  
Det er det, der vil gøre mig troværdig  
Ikke min tydelige alderdom  
Ikke mit lange livs tilsyneladende visdom  
Men den fælles magtesløse kærlighed

[‘We share this hard life  
We don’t kill our children,  
though we sometimes come near,  
I hope that no one hates us for it  
because they have no right to do so’

That is what I have to tell  
That is what will give me credibility  
Not my visible old age  
Not my long life’s apparent wisdom  
But the shared powerless love]

*(Strandgaard 2015, 53)*

How to treat and take proper care of children – especially physically and mentally disabled and/or abused children – is one of the central concerns of Strandgaard’s work from beginning to end. Here towards the end of the career she discovers an important social function or destination for one of the most fragile and socially exposed members of society, the old female poet, an utterly useless person by strict utilitarian criteria that would also find children with psychic diagnoses useless from the perspective of global capitalism. This function is carved out through the literary imagination: a force that connects, binds together through a shared ‘powerless love’ a group of stressed, fragile women. This connecting force is the force of credible storytelling, that is, literature. Literature is powerless, it can’t do a thing, and therein rests its real power, the power to move and connect the socially exposed and voiceless.

While honour in a traditional society might be something one gained and maintained as member of an elite through maintaining, often with violent means, one's own or one's collective's integrity against others' imposition, we might say that honour in the welfare state is something you gain and maintain by offering love and compassion to those in less fortunate situations without asking for anything in return. To call this honour is to counter conservative critics of the welfare state who find that its values are corruptive of such so-called noble values (Jensen 1998) and instead to point to the remaining presence of upholders and promoters of the kinds of values underpinning the welfare state in its traditional conception.

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