



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Uncanny Subjects

DeFalco, Amelia

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DeFalco, Amelia.

Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative.

The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/27742](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27742).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27742>



## CHAPTER ONE

# BACKWARD GLANCES

## Narrative Identity and Late-life Review

*Thus heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich.*

—Freud, “The Uncanny” 347

*To be a person is to have a story. More than that, it is to be a story.*

—Kenyon and Randall 1

**T**HE NOTION that human subjects are constituted by narrative has become something of a theoretical truism. As Kathleen Woodward puts it, “To *have* a life means to possess its narrative” (*Discontents* 83, original emphasis). The belief in narrative as what Frederic Jameson calls “the central function or *instance* of the human mind” is pervasive and persistent within both popular and academic discourses of identity (13, original emphasis). Still, there are detractors wary of the all-encompassing claims of the narrative identity thesis. For example, in an editorial for the journal *Narrative*, James Phelan considers the risks of what he calls “narrative imperialism,” that is, “the impulse by students of narrative to claim more and more territory” (206). More specifically, Phelan is uneasy with the constriction of identity that is the consequence of relying on a single story of self: “I cannot shake the awareness that whatever narrative I construct is only one of many possible narratives and that the relations among the subsets of these possibilities range from entirely compatible and mutually illuminating to entirely incompatible and mutually contradictory” (209).

In this chapter I propose that identity need not be mononarratological; in fact, I argue that aging forces a confrontation with the multiplicity that Phelan posits as undermining narrative identity, a multiplicity I interpret as intrinsic to both temporal identity *and* narrative. This assertion draws on Paul Ricoeur's vision of narrative and time as inextricably connected, the two forming, in his terms, a hermeneutic circle in which "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (*Time* 3: 3). In other words, human temporality makes self-understanding the result of narrative, a causal relationship that becomes increasingly obvious as subjects age.

Philosophers such as Richard Kearney, Alisdair MacIntyre, and Henry Venema follow Ricoeur in asserting that narrative is our primary means of expressing and interpreting a life. As Kearney explains, "[e]very human existence is a life in search of a narrative . . . because each human life is *always already* an implicit story" (*Stories* 129, original emphasis). His philosophical position stresses the innateness of narrative identity, describing every human being as full of "lots of little narratives trying to get out" (*Stories* 130). Henry Venema concurs, claiming that narrative identity provides "a poetic resolution to the problems of the dialectic of narrative and temporal experience" (97). Our temporality is our fragility, and it is this knowledge of the limited nature of life that not only makes our lives into narratives but also compels us to tell our stories: "The limit experience of death is the most sure sign of our finitude. Moreover, it is precisely *because* we are beings who know that we will die that we keep on telling stories, struggling to represent something of the unrepresentable, to hazard interpretations of the puzzles and aporias that surround us" (Kearney, *Strangers* 231, original emphasis). In other words, echoing Ricoeur's hermeneutic circle of narrative and time, human temporality is responsible both for life's incomprehensibility and for our need to attempt to explain it.

As a result, old age provokes a confrontation with the mutability of identities based on the range of accumulated narratives. This confrontation with change and newness often becomes a source of uncanniness as the proliferation of personal narratives exposes the chimerical nature of identity, rendering the subject a contested uncanny site, at once familiar and strange. The space of the uncanny, according to Freud, is marked by the collapse of boundaries, of the strange trespassing into regions of the familiar and vice versa. Aging involves perpetual transformation that unsettles any claims to secure identity, allowing strange newness to intrude into a subject's vision of a familiar self, and undermining efforts to construct coherent life reviews.

In this chapter, I explore narrative-based identity theories alongside several narrative texts that depict late-life review in action: Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Stone Angel*, John Banville’s novel *Shroud*, Carol Shields’s novel *The Stone Diaries*, and the film *The Company of Strangers*, directed by Cynthia Scott. These literary and film narratives both work with and rework the “life review” genre, exposing the implications of temporality for self-understanding.

## NARRATIVE IDENTITIES, “HEALTHY” IDENTITIES

The associations between later life and the evaluative backward glance are well established in both popular and academic culture, which often regard life as teleological, moving toward the telos of death, and the subject in old age as a collection of memories, a series of events that constitute the life narrative. Indeed, according to this perspective, human beings inevitably move along a recognizable trajectory: we are born, we grow, we mature, we die. For medical ethicists such as John Hardwig, the biological “facts” are clear: “We are mortal beings, and death is not only the end result of life, but its telos—the aim or purpose for which we are headed biologically” (Hardwig qtd. in Overall 32). Within this linear program, once one enters the realm of late life, there is little of the route left to look forward to, and as a result the gaze is typically directed backward, initiating a re-examination of the past. This is the vision of old age promoted by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, whose Life Cycle model sees a person aging through eight stages, each of which involves a central conflict between harmonious and disruptive elements (what he terms the syntonic and dystonic), a conflict that must be resolved in order for one to progress to the next stage of life.<sup>1</sup> The final stage, Old Age, involves a conflict between integrity and despair. Integration entails, in Erikson’s terms, “a sense of *coherence* and *wholeness*” (65, original emphasis). This sense is

1. Erikson’s eight stages—their central conflicts and ideal resolutions—are as follows:

- Stage one: Infancy. Basic trust versus mistrust resolving in hope.
- Stage two: Early childhood. Autonomy versus shame resolving in will.
- Stage three: Play age. Initiative versus guilt resolving in purpose.
- Stage four: School age. Industry versus inferiority resolving in competence.
- Stage five: Adolescence. Identity versus identity confusion resolving in fidelity.
- Stage six: Young adulthood. Intimacy versus isolation resolving in love.
- Stage seven: Adulthood. Generativity versus stagnation resolving in care.
- Stage eight: Old age. Integrity versus despair, disgust resolving in wisdom.

associated with interpretive recollection since, Erikson asserts, “[looking] back over a long past . . . helps us understand our lives and the world we live in” (6).

Close proximity to “the end,” real or imagined, often intensifies narrative impulses, resulting in a process of “life review” that involves close examination of life narratives. As psychoanalyst Henry Krystal explains, “In old age, as in treatment, we come to the point where our past lies unfolded before us, and the question is, What should be done with it?” (78). He implies that one’s past must be manipulated to be worthwhile. Though there may indeed be something inherently narrative about human existence, it is only via reflection and expression that such narrativity can be understood. This emphasis on the function of reflecting, of interpreting, produces the subject as an agent, one actively determining the meaning of his or her life, and implies a two-stage selfhood: simply “being” is not full existence; a complete subject ruminates and interprets. For Porter Abbott, survival depends on our ability “to read as well as to write our lives, perhaps in equal measure” (“Future” 539). Narrative identity results from *retelling* by linking events in a causal chain.

The centrality of narrative to selfhood is fundamental to the burgeoning field of narrative therapy, which insists on the psychological benefits of exploring, and often revising, the stories that make up a patient’s life. “Restorying” grants the subject a high degree of agency in identity formation involving “a set of stories we tell ourselves about our past, present and future. However, these stories are far from fixed, direct accounts of what happens in our lives, but products of the inveterate fictionalizing of our memory and imagination. That is, we ‘story’ our lives. Moreover, we *re-story* them too. In fact, restorying goes on continually within us” (Kenyon and Randall 2). The practice of “restorying” is essential to what Gary Kenyon and William Randall term their “*therapoetic*” perspective, which regards life narrative analysis and manipulation as the means to personal “*healing*” (1–2, original emphasis). Restorying “is a therapy for the sane. In it, storytelling (and storylistening) is not merely a method for solving particular problems that crop up in our lives, but has an importance and integrity all its own, as a means to personal wholeness. In this sense, it is a spiritual activity. Through it, *we become more of who we are*” (Kenyon and Randall 2, emphasis added). Even in an ostensibly flexible model of identity maintenance such as restorying, the fantasy remains of a solid, unyielding core, some self prior to narrative that is able to express itself *through* narrative, unsettling the notion of an entirely narrative-based subject. The rhetoric of “becoming oneself” and the diction of “wholeness”

and “healing” stress the corrective power of narrative manipulation; narrative therapy assumes some narratives are better, or at least healthier, than others.

A belief in the efficacy of “storying” one’s life provides the therapeutic basis for the practice of life review. Life review has a “multifaceted role: to aid the narrator in achieving new insight and peace of mind; to bring closure to troubling events through viewing them from a different perspective; and to restore as far as possible neglected skills or abilities” (Garland and Garland 4). A seminal article on life review by Robert Butler appearing in the journal *Psychiatry* in 1963 was largely responsible for sparking the interest in the topic that continues today. And though the current understanding of the practice may not employ Butler’s universalizing rhetoric—he describes life review as a “naturally occurring, universal mental process” (66)—an emphasis on the soothing power of analysis and understanding remains. In their practitioners’ guide to life review, Jeff and Christine Garland assert that “[r]eview gives direction to people’s lives as they move towards a valued endpoint, along a well-trodden track marked by success stories—and failures” (35). Life review falls within the category of narrative therapy, allowing subjects to optimize their life story through recognition, revision, and even disposal.<sup>2</sup>

But, as my analysis will demonstrate, there are other ways of retrieving and interpreting life narratives and their constitutive memories. For example, Kathleen Woodward takes issue with life review theory, in particular with Robert Butler’s version of the practice, which she regards as limiting in its emphasis on the location, or creation, of consistent and coherent life narratives (“Telling Stories” 150). Woodward argues that Butler’s life review insists on summary and analysis, on rational order. Instead of life review, she prefers the more open-ended process of “reminiscence,” which “does not promise the totality of the life review. It is more fragmentary and partial. Reminiscence is concerned with a certain moment, or moments, in the past” (151). She regards reminiscence as “generative and restorative,” less analytical and restrictive than life review (151). In these terms, reminiscence makes room for multiplicity and mutability, the flux of narrative identity promoted by Ricoeur and Kearney. Life review tends to be a process of analytical revision, much like the practice of narrative therapy, attempting to locate *the* life narrative that will provide the aging

2. Life review often has “three stages: focusing on what has been learned about self in relation to others; considering whether this learning is still relevant; and recognizing what should be retained, revising what is unclear, and discarding what is no longer required” (Garland and Garland 3).

subject with a stable, comprehensible self. Like aging studies theorists such as Kaufman, Esposito, and Holland, psychologists Butler and Erikson assume a singularity of identity, a constancy through *the* life cycle that facilitates comfortable narrative summation in old age. However, as literary and film narratives can make clear in their fabricated “life reviews,”<sup>3</sup> such a process of coherent, enlightening summing up is difficult, if not impossible. *The Stone Angel*, *Shroud*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *The Company of Strangers* suggest the problems, and even risks, that result from regarding life as a singular teleology readily available for narrative transposition. These novels and this film suggest that life narratives are multiple and complex, rife with ambiguities and contradictions, with interpretive blindspots, frustrating ellipses. As the various narrators and characters of these texts make clear, “looking back” rarely, if ever, yields a clear narrative of self. Instead, the reading and writing of lives in these texts exposes the very mutability at the heart of narrative itself, wedded as it is to ever-changing temporality.

The therapeutic preference for certain narratives as more appropriate for psychological healing is, of course, part of the legacy of the psychoanalytic “talking cure,” which “meets psychological pain with narrative” (Hemmings 109). In psychoanalysis, narrative can become an anodyne as “healthy” stories are made to replace dysfunctional ones.<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur refers to psychoanalytic practice as a corrective foray into a patient’s narrative identity, in which the

process of the cure . . . is to substitute for the bits and pieces of stories that are unintelligible as well as unbearable, a coherent and acceptable story, in which the analysand can recognize his or her self-constancy. In this regard, psychoanalysis constitutes a particularly instructive laboratory for a properly philosophical inquiry into the notion of a narrative identity. In it, we can see how the story of a life comes to be constituted through a series of rectifications applied to previous narratives. (*Time* 3: 247)

3. A number of critics have attempted to categorize fiction “focused on the last phase of life, the stage which prepares for death” as the generic counterpart to the *Bildungsroman* (Fortunati 158). Termed variously *Reifungsroman* (Waxman), *Altersroman* (Westervelt), and *Vollendungsroman* (Rooke), the designated narratives deal with ripening, review, completion. In narratives of this genre, “the aged person no longer occupies a marginal position, but becomes a central character with a complex psyche, around which the interests of the narrative are centered” (Fortunati 158).

4. For more on the narrative implications of psychoanalysis, see Steven Marcus’s “Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History,” and Donald Spence’s *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis*.

Though Ricoeur's elaborations of narrative identity are essential for my own consideration of aging, I diverge from Ricoeur in these questions of narrative rectification. I do not deny that particular narratives may be less painful and more inspiring than others, but I am wary of the assumption that the analyst can be helped to easily substitute and revise bits of stories in order to produce a more comfortable narrative. Rather, I am interested, like Woodward, in narrative identity in its "bits and pieces" and occasional incoherence. If aging is in part an *accumulation* (of memory, of stories), then the older subject is likely a site of conflicting versions, narrative fragments, even "unacceptable" stories. In other words, older subjects, with their large volume of versions, may be particularly susceptible to narrative instability.

Though narrative is able to provide the comfort of meaning and identity, its temporal nature means that it is always fluid, open to revision and retelling. Interpreting the subject as reader and writer of his or her own life means that alternate interpretations and tellings are always available. As Ricoeur himself explains, psychoanalytic rectification notwithstanding, narrative is "not a stable and seamless identity," making it "the name of the problem at least as much as it is that of a solution" (*Time 3*: 248, 249); narrative identity is always in flux as it "continues to make and unmake itself" (249). Though mutability is an unavoidable effect of temporality, narrative subjects often long for the "stable and seamless identity" of totalizing stories, for metanarratives able to encapsulate a life. Ricoeur charts a space of subject-formation between absolute flux and rigid singularity with the notion of the *ipse*, or self-sameness. As discussed in the introduction, self-sameness incorporates the dynamism that results from temporal human existence by locating identity in narrative: "the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told" (Ricoeur, *Time 3*: 246). The productive incorporation of change and cohesion relies on *recognition*, on the subjects' ability to read and write their lives, to "recognize themselves in the stories they tell about themselves" (*Time 3*: 247). Aging, understood as the human experience of time, draws attention to the dynamism of identity that Ricoeur promotes. But despite the ubiquity of narrative-based concepts of identity that would seem to incorporate mutability, change can function as a frightful specter that threatens to upset the illusion of an established and impermeable self. The prospect of multiple versions, multiple selves introduced by aging can provoke a disorienting unsteadiness as distinctions and categories blur, as oppositions refuse to hold, as identity "develops in the

direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite”—that is, as identity moves toward uncanniness.

## DYNAMISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Models of dynamic narrative identity are not without their critics. Many identity theorists, particularly those involved in the study of aging, are uneasy with mutable models of multiple identity, fearful of the relativism and “inauthenticity” that can result from discarding singular selves with verifiable histories. Aging studies critics continue to grapple with the “paradox” of aging, a double movement involving simultaneous gain and loss. Aging’s uncanniness, its “paradoxical development in which we are both more and less than we were before” (Schwartz 7), contributes to theories of core identity, obscured, but not essentially altered, by the changes of age. According to such models, the “kernel sentence” (Schwartz 7), the “ultimate self” (Esposito 138), the “core self” (Hepworth 29) remains reliably stolid amid the movement of time. Wariness toward dynamism is often expressed as a deep skepticism toward seemingly aimless, consumerist postmodernism. Aging studies critic Simon Biggs asserts that “postmodern theorizing results in trajectory without teleology. It has movement without direction and makes a virtue out of disconnection” (*Mature Imagination* 66). Elsewhere, Biggs is even more vehement in his rejection of mutable narrative identity, likening it to “a sort of Stalinism for the postmodern mind: a denial of the past as an anchor, as a source of embeddedness for authentic identity” (“Blurring’ the Life Course” 218). So unsettling is the idea of “forgetting,” or more precisely, inaccurate remembrance, that Biggs goes to metaphorical extremes, casting the rewriting and rereading of personal narratives as totalitarian manipulation.

Anxiety concerning the potential erosion of the subject reflects a larger critical uneasiness stemming from questioning the autonomy and stability of the metaphysical subject—in short, stemming from the philosophical challenges of postmodern theory. When assumptions about the self’s wholeness are replaced by the recognition of the constructedness of the subject, there are aging studies critics who read this as the disintegration of individuality. The “dissolution of the subject . . . [,] its dispersal into a multiplicity of voices” (Schwab 18), is countered by those who insist on some persistent degree of human autonomy and reject what they perceive as the utter helplessness of the entirely “subjected” and theoretical postmodern subject. But postmodern subjectivity is not merely the murky indetermi-

nacy ascribed to it by its critics. A postmodern perspective provides the potential for an open-ended version of identity, one in which the subject is a shifting site inscribed by various discourses. The discursive subject is one prone to revision, one “in process” rather than fixed, part of history rather than outside of it (Hutcheon 37). There is freedom in such multiplicity. Postmodernism makes room for protean, decentered, even contradictory subjects, tolerating doubleness and uncertainty without insisting on wholeness and final resolution (Hutcheon 111). And aging has the capacity to contribute positively to postmodern theories of identity.

The conflict between the postmodern, discursive subject and the lived experience of subjectivity is not easily resolved, and such a task is certainly beyond the scope of this book; but following the lead of narrative theorists such as Kearney and Ricoeur, it is possible to find a productive space of inquiry *between* the desire for phenomenological truth and a secure internal self as expressed by Biggs, on the one hand, and the dismissal of selfhood as ideological, semantic illusion on the other. Kearney echoes Ricoeur’s reconciliatory narrative model, arguing that the narrative subject allows “the hermeneutic middle way,” positing a “post-metaphysical self in our postmodern culture” (*Strangers* 188). Kearney remains “convinced that it is possible to continue to speak meaningfully of a narrative *ipse*—self-sameness—in the framework of a hermeneutic conversation which takes on board the postmodern assaults on the sovereign cogito without dispensing with all notions of selfhood” (188–89). If subjectivity stems from narration, and such a “memoried self” relies on the past for constructing selfhood, aging is what facilitates subjectivity; only with age can subjects accumulate histories, memories, selves. George Butte reiterates the possibility of Kearney’s “middle way” in his claim that “the force that finally limits the centrifuge of the shattered cogito of postmodernism . . . is time experienced in bodies and, more specifically, time in the form of intersubjective narrative” (7). With age we become increasingly aware that we are subjects of time—we bear its traces on our bodies, which appear to belong, often uncannily, to both the past and the present.

A belief in multiplicity, in various, even contradictory selves, makes selfhood possible without risking a plunge into the reductive dualism of inner and outer identity, of true cores and social masks. A mediated subject facilitates flux, contradiction, and ambivalence. In the textual analysis that follows I examine three novels and a film that evoke narrative identity in their dramatizations of the “life review” process. In *The Stone Angel*, *Shroud*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *The Company of Strangers*, characters self-consciously narrate the self, confronting, to varying degrees, what Husserl

calls “the paradox of human subjectivity: being a subject for the world and at the same time being an object in the world” (178). Characters from these texts shift into a space of unsettling uncanniness as they attempt to negotiate a variety of selves, drawing attention to the simultaneous self/other status of the subject, a new awareness that moves them toward a recognition of what Ricoeur would call oneself as another. To look back is to gaze at the uncanniness of self.

## *THE STONE ANGEL* Fragile Dualism

In many ways, *The Stone Angel* appears in line with the models of life review fostered by Butler and Erikson in its narrator’s appeal to recollection as a means toward self-recognition and the summation of a life. Hagar uses memory to chart a chronological past, alternating between reminiscence and present-day action, a dualist pattern that reveals a split subject struggling to negotiate between competing selves: past and present, young and old, authentic and distorted. Laurence depicts Hagar’s attempts to construct a metanarrative of self (albeit a self in conflict) that conjures a distinct subject moving through time in an orderly fashion. In her efforts to arrange and divide her narrative, and therefore her self, Hagar attempts to skirt the uncanny instability produced by mortal life. Despite her desire to discover, even enforce, a singular, authentic identity, divergent, even contradictory narratives thwart her efforts, exposing the mutability and multiplicity concomitant with temporal identity.

*The Stone Angel* depicts a character struggling to reconcile past and present, and offers a binaristic model of selfhood that corresponds to Hagar’s persistent frustration and anger at what she perceives as a delinquent old self that distorts her true, young self. Hagar repeatedly endeavors to deny and resist her own temporality, and by implication, her own narrativity, in the very process of narrating her life story. Despite Hagar’s explicit rejection of mutability and uncanniness, Laurence encourages readers to recognize Hagar’s *ongoing* strangeness within. The novel’s persistent irony, which resides in the gap between Hagar’s staunch, independent character and the infirm ninety-year-old woman reliant on the care of others, along with its accumulation of symbols, including the sightless stone angel, and numerous helpless animals, produces a kind of counternarrative, one that seems aware of its own blindness, even when its protagonist is not. The tension between implied author and narrating protagonist generates a

doubleness within the text itself, one that, much like the uncanny, at once reveals and conceals internal difference.

Hagar's narrative of her past reveals a subject wrestling with the physical desire she cannot acknowledge or reject. In her old age, when corporeal needs and events have become so undeniable, she continues to battle against her carnality, denying her incontinence and tears:

[T]erribly, I perceive the tears, my own they must be although they have sprung so unbidden I feel they are like the incontinent wetness of the infirm. Trickling, they taunt down my face. They are no tears of mine, in front of her. I dismiss them, blaspheme against them—let them be gone. But I have not spoken and they are still there. (31)<sup>5</sup>

Hagar similarly refuses to acknowledge her hunger and thirst, and it is this inattention to her bodily needs that causes great suffering at Shadow Point; though she brings crackers and cheese on her journey, she forgets to take along any water. Of course this oversight is also part of the novel's allusive project, which aligns Hagar with various literary characters by multiple allusions. Laurence's Hagar is the lonely "ancient mariner" and the biblical Hagar abandoned to the wilderness, both characters who yearn for fresh water. The various allusions in the novel serve to accentuate the parabolic narrative shape, Hagar's descent into a nadir from which she must struggle to ascend, moving toward (arguably limited) redemption. In Hagar's dualistic narrative, past and present are interdependent, running in parallel lines that dip and rise in unison.

As much as Hagar is telling her story, it is telling her. In fact, an examination of her narratives reveals that this latter transaction, Hagar's constitution via narrative, is dominant. "We are subject *to* narrative as well as being subjects *of* narrative," writes Richard Kearney (*On Stories* 153, original emphasis); but in Hagar's case, the emphasis falls more strongly on "*to*" since her recollections determine her identity yet she often refuses to reflect on her own narrative, functioning more as mouthpiece than as determining agent, or interpretive author. To be sure, there are moments in the text when Hagar seems capable of becoming an interpretive agent, but these moments are fleeting and not sustained. Perhaps the most obvious example is her revelation about pride that comes when the clergyman,

5. Donna Pennee's interpretation of the incontinent body in *The Stone Angel* falls within the larger discourse of paradox and contradiction surrounding the novel. She argues that multiple incontinences in the novel expose Hagar as both victim and agent (4). For more on *The Stone Angel* and incontinence, see Alice Bell and Sally Chivers.

Mr. Troy, sings to her. In pain and near death, Hagar is moved to epiphany, momentarily recognizing the debilitating impact of pride, shame, and fear on her life. The revelation appears in terms remarkably reminiscent of Freud's "uncanny": self-knowledge resides in "some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed" (292). But, as always, the instant of interpretation and insight is fleeting, and Hagar returns to the rigid confines of an identity formed long ago, one "unchangeable, unregenerate" (293). There are several such moments of insight and reckoning, all of which are brief, painfully achieved, or confined within the haze of semiconsciousness, the insight dissolving as the moment passes.

"Now I am rampant with memory" (Laurence 5): this oft-cited remark occurs early in the novel, initiating Hagar's repeated contact with narratives of the past. The phrase suggests an inversion of the recollecting, storytelling subject. In Hagar's figuration, memory is the active agent that overtakes its subject, and as a result the subject takes on its more subservient meaning as one *subjected*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us that "rampant" refers to things "[u]nchecked, unrestrained, aggressive. . . . Having full sway or unchecked course in the individual or (more commonly) in general society." The term's etymology is linked to wild animals, and one denotation refers to a beast reared on its hind legs.<sup>6</sup> Clearly there is no space here for calm, contemplative reflections; a rampant memory is a wild and domineering force that demands release in the narrative: "Now I light one of my cigarettes and stump around my room, remembering furiously, for no reason except that I am caught up in it" (6). This narrative, this remembered past, determines Hagar, a wildness of recollection she still prefers to the boredom in the present, where she is treated as a thing by "the middling ones" (6), as "a cash crop" (6), and "a calf, to be fattened" (35).

In the voicing of her life narrative Hagar undermines the multiplicity and flexibility of mediated identity. She seeks to maintain a stiff narrative line bisected into before and after, which could allow her to pinpoint the constitution of self and its subsequent perversion. For Hagar Shipley, the unfamiliarity of the self in the present is in direct contrast to the "true" self of her youth, Hagar *Currie*. Yet Hagar's maiden name deconstructs her

6. Sally Chivers's analysis of *The Stone Angel* emphasizes the preponderance of animal metaphors and similes in the novel, suggesting that such "bestial and derogatory" vehicles are an effect of the collision between memories of youth and the fearful difficulties of old age. She suggests that such figurative language effects a distancing from the present, from old age, since Hagar can reach the present only through derogatory and evasive metaphor, producing a "tenor [that] continually shifts and evades readers" (30).

own nostalgic vision of a youthful, whole self. The obsolete term “currie” refers to “[t]he portions of an animal slain in the chase that were given to the hounds . . . [or] any prey thrown to the hounds to be torn in pieces” (*OED*). In other words, “Currie” signifies the ruin of a wild creature, suggesting that even in her youth, the patriarchal destruction of the “wild,” “willful” feminine was already underway—“Currie” being the name passed on to Hagar through her father. Her narrative documents the undoing of that supposedly true, “Currie” self that has led to the disavowed “figure” of the present, one that appears “arbitrary and impossible” (38). Hagar repeatedly locates herself in a long past moment “when I first began to remember and to notice myself” (38). This period of authentic selfhood occurred when she was Hagar Currie, teetering between the domination of two patriarchs: her father and her future husband. In this brief moment of (illusory) freedom, Hagar is on the brink of marriage, giddily defying her father’s wishes and not yet burdened by the realities of her ill-conceived union to Bram Shipley. Hagar’s father refuses to condone the marriage, but Hagar is determined: “‘There’s not a decent girl in this town would wed without her family’s consent,’ he said. ‘It’s not done.’ ‘It’ll be done by me,’ I said, drunk with exhilaration at my daring” (49).<sup>7</sup> Hagar imagines wholeness and freedom in the fleeting liminal space of transition, a space of change that she transforms into a static portrait of authenticity.

So fixed is Hagar on a definitive, youthful version of selfhood that her current status is often a shock: “I glance down at myself . . . and see with surprise and unfamiliarity the great swathed hips. My waist was twenty inches” (56). The selective use of possessive pronouns betrays Hagar’s disavowal, articulating her aged body as entirely other, an unfamiliar and unpleasant object at odds with the body, the self, she lays claim to: only the youthful body of the past is “my” body. Ironically, in her diligent emplotment of her life, Hagar locates herself in *images*, rejecting the temporality, the transition intrinsic to narrative. As I discuss in chapter 3, the double is a recurrent trope in narratives of aging, particularly of aging women, and though Hagar Currie does not return with the frightening

7. Notably, it is during this liminal moment between men that Hagar’s father seems to briefly acknowledge her subject status, calling his daughter by her name:

Then, without warning, he reached out a hand like a lariat, caught my arm, held and bruised it, not even knowing he was doing so.

“Hagar—” he said. “You’ll not go, Hagar.”

The only time he ever called me by my name. To this day I couldn’t say if it was a question or a command. I didn’t argue with him. There never was any use in that. But I went, when I was good and ready, all the same. (49)

violence of the spectral fan in John Cassavetes' *Opening Night*, the image of youth in *The Stone Angel* is as undeniable and illusory (and at times even as invasive) as such specters. Hagar's narrative works to deny its own temporality through its efforts to impose constancy—Hagar *is* the young, beautiful unruly girl on the brink of marriage in a first experience of self-awareness—and to deny transience—Hagar *is not* the impoverished aged woman in her husband's overcoat selling eggs at Lottie's backdoor. Nor is she the old woman she sees reflected in a restroom mirror: "My hair was gray and straight. . . . The face—a brown and leathery face that *wasn't mine*. Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some *truer image*, infinitely distant" (133, emphasis added). Hagar's observation reinforces the opposition between youth and age, truth and falsity, resulting in a denial that attempts to consign the distorted, delinquent—that is, aged—self to the space of otherness.

Hagar consistently perceives old age as other, separate from the immutable self she desires. Her denial of change results in a wholehearted insistence on her aged self as artificial, even incorrect. Hagar strenuously disavows temporality, unsuccessfully denying her own difference through othering. Her story emphasizes identity dissolution, a movement *away* from her true, imagistic self, a narrative of aberration. From the vital, familiar self of youth—"Hagar with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the training ring" (42)—to the unfamiliar wife and mother with a "face that wasn't mine," to the "arbitrary and impossible" image in the present (38), Hagar's narrative trajectory is one of loss and diminution. Her inability to tolerate a shifting narrative identity, and her insistence on the fixed and absent image of her memory, inhibit her awareness of otherness *within*. Unable to fully accept the plasticity of narrative identity, Hagar remains trapped in the mournful dualism of past wholeness and present disintegration.

Hagar is not alone in her insistence on temporal segregation. As Kathleen Woodward makes clear, age gradations "ultimately and precipitously devolve into a single binary—into youth and age. Age is a subtle continuum, but we organize this continuum into 'polar opposites'" (Woodward, *Discontents* 6). Woodward identifies such evaluative segmentation as the legacy of a psychoanalytic conception of a bodily ego formed in childhood: "The ego takes shape in infancy; the surface of the body is imagined as smooth, that is, as unwrinkled—in short, as *young*. Thus in Freudian discourse the aging body would be a sign of *deformation*" (10). Consequently, youth often becomes, as Patricia Mellencamp asserts, "a lost object rather than a process or a passage. One can imagine an acceleration

of this with age, portrayed as a series of losses rather than achievements, gains, or successes for women. An abnormal modeling of ego or self as an object, often of contempt, rather than a subject can be the raged result” (281). Frustration, contempt, even rage, are obvious in Hagar’s narrative; indeed, the novel opens with an epigraph from Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” But while Thomas is urging a dying father to rage against death, to rise up vibrant and vital, Hagar’s rage is directed both outward and inward in a flailing hatred of time and aging. Trapped as Hagar is in a past image, her narrative is one of frustration, of “*deformation*,” since it inevitably moves her away from her beloved youth.

Unable to confront her own temporality and acknowledge strangeness *within*, she is similarly unable to empathize with the other older women patients in the hospital where she is taken after her “rescue” from Shadow Point. She is unnerved by what she can only regard as decrepitude, demanding a private room to protect her from the threat of association with these aged others. She does get her wish, but her move to a semiprivate suite comes just as she is beginning to glimpse the humanity of the other patients, an awareness of their position as subjects. The revelation that Hagar has been talking in her sleep, a disclosure she immediately rejects, suggests the existence of multiple versions, of stories that her conscious cannot abide (259). The narrative voiced in sleep is precisely “everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light.”<sup>8</sup> Hagar projects otherness onto the other patients, whom she regards as old, infirm nuisances, as abjectly corporeal with their “open-mouthed yawns . . . gaseous belches, volcanic wind” (258). However, this projection is undermined by the shocking discovery that she herself is *one of them* when another patient informs Hagar of her uncanny storytelling:

“Well, what kind of night did you have?” she asks. “Kinda disturbed eh?”

8. This particular secret, sleep-talking, both unveils and maintains Hagar’s incomprehensibility, an element of strangeness that can never be entirely domesticated: the uncanny unearthing of dark secrets is always only a partial exposure. An element of irreducible otherness must always remain. This is part of the very uncanniness of Freud’s “The Uncanny,” which demonstrates the necessary limits to explanation since exhaustive explanation would in effect eradicate the very phenomenon it seeks to explore. In other words, the uncanny and Freud’s investigation of it extend to the limits of representation since the term by definition relies on a degree of semantic and interpretive uncertainty.

Her voice has that insufferable brightness that I loathe. I'm not in the mood for her cheerfulness. I wish to heaven she'd go away and leave me alone.

"I scarcely slept a wink," I reply. "Who could, in this place, with all the moaning and groaning that goes on? You might as well try to sleep in a railway station."

"You was the one doing most of the talking," she says. "I heard you. You was up twice, and the nurse had to put you back."

I looked at her coldly. "You must be mistaken. I never said a word. I was right here in this bed all night. I certainly never moved a muscle."

"That's what you think," she says. (258–59)

Hagar's sleep-talking exposes her own strangeness, the multiplicity and unfamiliarity of self that distressingly associates her with the others in the hospital ward. Hers is one of the night voices that speak unbidden when "darkness swarms" (273). These night voices are like "remembered fragments painted on shadow" (274); they "stir like fretful leaves against a window":

Tom, don't you worry none—  
 Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of—  
 Mein Gott, erlöse mich—  
 You mind that time, Tom? I mind it so well—  
 I am sorry for having offended Thee, because I love—  
 Erlöse mich von meinen Schmerzen—  
 Bram! (275)

It is a shock for Hagar to recognize her own cries among the others; indeed, "Some time elapses" before she recognizes her voice (275). Hagar's outburst appears as one fragment within an unattributed list of speech that makes her voice one of many in a chorus of sleep-talking. Hagar's recognition briefly pierces through the protective blindness that makes us "refuse to acknowledge ourselves-as-others" (Kearney, *Strangers* 5). Hagar momentarily glimpses, or more precisely, hears, herself-as-other in her uncanny utterance: she discovers a voice and a story that is her own, that is *her*, and yet is unfamiliar. Aging, and the association with other aging women, move Hagar into a space of uncanny recognition in which the illusion of the singular, authentic self begins to dissolve into multiple versions. As philosopher Henry Venema explains in his inquiry into Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, "there is no meta-narrative that can totalize

my experience. Narrative identity is an identity of various stories” (97). The unbidden voice, speaking in fragments, speaking from sleep, speaking alongside many others, divulges the cacophonous self: unstable, various, at once other and self.

But this uncanny recognition is cut short when Hagar is whisked away to the semiprivate quarters she had requested. In her new room, which she shares with a young woman hospitalized for an appendectomy, Hagar quickly returns to her exclusive identification with the “lost object” of youth: “I was quite slender at your age,” she tells the thin, young nurse who ministers to her, “I had black hair, long, halfway down my back. Some people thought me quite pretty. You’d never think so to look at me now” (283). Once again Hagar locates herself in a static memory that makes time into a process of dissolution and paradoxical inflation, since it magnifies the body’s importance by “deforming” it. She shares her new room with a young woman whose youthfulness quickly inspires Hagar’s empathy, unlike the old women of the public ward, who initially prompted irritation and disgust.<sup>9</sup>

The novel emphasizes a static vision of selfhood that equates time and change primarily with debilitation in its framing image of the stone angel; in her full (though blind) glory at the outset, she is altered by time at the novel’s end: “she stood askew and tilted. Her mouth was white. We didn’t touch her. We only looked. Someday she’ll topple entirely, and no one will bother to set her upright again” (305). Original integrity is set against the collapsed future, the metonymic angel neatly bracketing Hagar’s narrative of her own fall.

However, though the novel does employ these stone angel images as a frame, the weather-beaten angel does not close the novel. The novel’s actual ending, two pages later, gives temporality the final word. The final lines, like the sleep-talking scene, rupture the neatness of the singular self, the simple bisection of Hagar’s life into before and after. Hagar’s narrative is aborted by mortality and the novel’s concluding fragment, “And then—” (308), achieves a simultaneous suspension and triumph of time. This artificial maintenance of the present—the reader is always here, on the verge, unable to move to the next moment—creates an ending that flouts closure.

9. Despite the fact that her roommate, Sandra Wong, is a young Chinese-Canadian woman, Hagar more easily identifies with her than with her contemporaries in the previous ward. Here we see evidence of Woodward’s claim that “in advanced old age, age may assume more importance than any of the other differences which distinguish our bodies from others” (*Discontents* 16). Hagar easily overlooks ethnicity in order to identify with youth.

As a result, the novel, and by extension, Hagar, can be always *on the verge of* and concluded at once. The uncanniness Hagar refused to accept finds her at her death in this fragment, this simultaneous presence and absence, this unfinished completion.

*The Stone Angel* depicts a character struggling to reconcile past and present, and presents a binaristic model of self that corresponds to Hagar's persistent frustration and anger at what she perceives as a delinquent old self that distorts her true, young self. Hagar repeatedly endeavors to deny and resist her own uncanniness, an uncanniness that she only glimpses at various points in her narration. Though her own awareness is fleeting, the implied author encourages readers to recognize Hagar's *ongoing* strangeness within. The novel's tone, duplicitous diction, and accumulation of symbols produce a kind of counternarrative, one that seems aware of its own blindness, even when its protagonist is not. The tension between implied author and narrating protagonist generates a doubleness within the text itself, one that, much like the uncanny, at once reveals and conceals internal difference. Many "life review" fictional narratives grapple more overtly with the uncanny nonfixity of identity enforced by human temporality. While Hagar narrates her childhood-to-death story of her life, fictional narratives can reveal characters negotiating a panoply of life stories that problematize the summarizing and analysis involved in life review, raising thorny questions about identity and ethical commitment.

### "SHIFT AND SLIDE" Narrative Multiplicity in *Shroud*

*"Grown old, the imagination, as I have been finding out, tends to play unnerving tricks. . . . The familiar will shift and slide, will change places with things never seen before. A known face will turn into that of a stranger, a window will open onto a vista, menacing and dark, that was not there a moment ago."*

—Axel Vander in *Shroud* 223

John Banville's novel *Shroud* is the account of narrator Axel Vander's efforts to set the record straight, to "explain myself, to myself, and to you, my dear" (4). The ghostly interlocutor, "you," is gradually revealed to be Cass Cleave, a young critic who has found evidence that would expose the celebrated philosopher as a perpetrator of identity theft. Cass's material evidence, a newspaper clipping that shows a young "Axel" with the real Axel Vander, a friend of his youth whose identity he eventually assumed,

forces the old philosopher to confront the lingering traces of the self he has struggled to shed. Axel imagines his divorce from his own past in a grotesquely visceral image of flaying, picturing his former self as a hideous anchor of empty skin: “I had thought I had shaken off the pelt of my past yet here was evidence that it would not be sloughed, but was dragging along behind me, still attached by a thread or two of dried slime” (7). From the vantage point of a debilitated, uncomfortable old age, Axel becomes newly aware of this and other persistent “pelts,” and so his narration becomes an exploration of the many versions of his life, a project that is seemingly at odds with his own antihumanist philosophical legacy,<sup>10</sup> which decries the very notion of identity.<sup>11</sup>

The discomfiting changes of old age coupled with a forced confrontation with an unpleasant trace of a disowned personal history provoke Axel to reexamine the “primordial darkness” of his past with its “scattered . . . points of cold, hard light, immensely distant, each from each, and from me” (1–2). These “scattered,” alienated selves continue to burn in the darkness, despite Axel’s various efforts to extinguish, or at least deny, them. The novel charts a subject begrudgingly exploring his own selfhood from a wide variety of positions (as narrator and interlocutor, subject and object) that move him further and further into the space of uncanny apprehension. In a sense, Axel Vander is haunted by himself, by the very possibility of selfhood, which he has spent his career decrying as illusion. His effort to explain himself, that is, to tell the stories of his life, or more accurately, lives, devolves into a series of versions, a jumble of voices. Axel’s own narration proposes, perhaps inadvertently, the possibility of a middle ground between entirely verifiable or illusory identities,

10. Axel’s philosophical theories, along with his hidden past tainted by unsavory Second World War collaboration, are part of the character’s connection to deconstructionist Paul de Man, whose numerous essays for a Belgian collaborationist newspaper were discovered posthumously. Much like Axel Vander, de Man’s narratives are multiple and contradictory, calling into question any definitive account of the man at once deconstructionist, Sterling Professor at Yale, collaborator, anti-Semite. *Shroud* grapples with the implications of a philosophy of multiple and shifting meaning and how the instability of narrative identity can be manipulated in order to conceal and mislead. But in the cases of both Axel and de Man, the deception eventually falters, and that which “*ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden . . . come[s] to light.*”

11. According to Elke D’hoker, an attention to the difficulty of securing stable selfhood recurs throughout Banville’s fiction: “the male voice in Banville’s texts is always that of a slightly grotesque, slightly uncanny outsider who contemplates the world and its creatures, others and himself” (1). The uncanny is important in Banville’s fiction, but especially so in this fiction of the aging narrator.

replacing Axel's early insistence on revealing his true self, "some small precious thing" (5), with a more dynamic identity able to incorporate change and even duplicity. By moving through various narratives and perspectives, Axel gains some awareness of his own difference and, by implication, an increased ethical understanding and even "the possibility of redemption" (5). Narrative both provides a means of affirming and creating selfhood and offers an opportunity for exploring the instability of that selfhood.

For Axel, "the onset of extreme old age" is experienced as "a gradual process of accumulation, a slow settling as of soft grey stuff, like the dust in the untended house, under which the once sharp edges of my self are blurring" (14). The novel's early chapters explore the uncanniness of this "blurring" that makes the self so eerily strange and familiar. Initially, it is the difficulties of the aged body that are uncanny, and Axel imagines his corporeality, his "suety old flesh" (6), as affliction. He has the uncanny sensation that he is "falling off [him]self" (6), recalling the paradoxical position brought about by aging, one of simultaneous presence and absence. For Axel, old age is an experience of being at once himself and other than himself, an uncanny subject position that gives rise to a paradoxical image of self-alienation: "That is what I am, a dead weight hung about my own neck" (6). But, as we learn over the course of the novel, this identity of difference, this otherness encountered in old age, is merely an exacerbation of an ongoing strangeness within. These vagaries of the flesh alert Axel to a long-lingering unsteadiness of selfhood that he can now no longer deny. Axel's "accumulation" has been lifelong: names, nationalities, stories, and deceptions. Old age is often popularly figured as an accretion of time that goes hand in hand with the amassing of narrative. The image of the "blurred self" powerfully illustrates the unsettling recognition of uncanny identity that old age can lay bare. The high resolution of the illusory unified self, with its familiar, stable body and its identifiable life narrative, can give way to the indistinction of temporal identity, to fluidity, to instability. *Shroud* effectively captures the ambiguity of uncanny old age, demonstrating the ethical potential of the "blurred self" along with its frightful alienating effects.

The novel's opening line, "Who speaks?," underscores its preoccupation with the ethical dimensions of narrative authority. Just as the plot is a gradual revelation of identity appropriation, the narration comes to divulge its own duplicity, revealing a single narrative agent behind a variety of voices. The dual perspectives in the novel, Axel's first-person narration and Cass's third-person focalization, collapse into one another as the reader realizes that Cass's reflections, insights, emotional responses, have

all been supplied by Axel himself. Already dead at the start of the novel, Cass is unable to share her perspective, and Axel's version of her is the only one available. Axel does not assume her voice—his is the only first-person narration—but recreates her subjectivity in the details of focalization. Through Cass's constructed perspective Axel consigns himself to the position of aged other, entirely estranged from her. She observes his naked body as a temporal object, a vision of alterity that the reader later learns comes from Axel himself:

There were brown moles on his back, and long grey hairs sprouting on his shoulder blades, and the loose flesh of his lop-sided rump wobbled when he walked. She had never seen anyone so huge, so naked and so defenceless. She pondered in mild amazement the mystery of time and time's damagings. Soon, in a very few years, a decade at most, surely, he would be gone, and all that he had been and was now would be no more.  
(121)

Only one page later the novel delivers the details of Axel's duplicity, that he himself is the source of these impassively objectifying observances. The third- and first-person pronouns converge to produce a cubist image of selfhood, one that incorporates a disorienting variety of identity positions. The manipulation of perspective responds to the novel's opening query by exposing the impossibility of the question, which relies on a fantasy of stability and singularity. In these few pages, tellingly positioned at the very centre of the novel, the possibility of essential selves shatters:

He drew his hand from under the bedclothes and held it up for her to see. "With this I wrote those articles you found," he said. "Not a single cell survives in it from that time. Then whose hand is it?" He, I, I saw again the empty bottle on its side, the mauve pills in my palm. I closed my eyes. I listened to the wind washing over the rooftops. The girl rose and came forward and knelt beside the bed and took my hand in both of hers and brought it to her lips and kissed it. I. (122–23)

*Then whose hand is it?* Old age is here a revelation of temporality in its starkest terms. The uncanny paradox of the age-altered self moves the subject into the space of alterity and back again as Axel experiences, in quick succession, his body as time-damaged object and active agent, his voice as another's and then his own. Between the "inexistence of the self" that Axel pronounces in his professional life (122) and the "enduring core of self-

hood amid the welter of the world” that he longs for (18) is the liminality of uncanny identity, that of the perpetually aging subject existing in time, in narrative.

The uncanny vision afforded by age moves Axel toward an ethical understanding unavailable in his youth. In particular, it is the process of narrativizing his many pasts that leads him toward this new ethical insight. Kearney regards narrative as means for ethical understanding since it facilitates a navigation of the space between self and other, even leading toward “*narrative understanding*: a working-through of loss and fear by means of cathartic imagination and mindful acknowledgement” (*Strangers* 8, original emphasis). Narrative can help us explore the space between self and other, “build[ing] paths between the worlds of *autos* and *heteros*,” paths of understanding that can “help us to discover the other in our self and our self in the other—without abjuring either” (*Strangers* 10). Kearney calls his model, “diacritical hermeneutics,” a “third way,” one beyond romantic and radical visions of alterity, that promotes the possibility of “intercommunion between distinct but not incomparable selves. . . . Between the *logos* of the One and the anti-*logos* of the Other, falls the *dialogos* of oneself-as-another” (*Strangers* 18). Axel’s multiple life narratives show both the liberatory potential and difficulty, even danger, of charting this “third way,” a way that opens his eyes to his own otherness and to the humanity of other people. Telling his story, explaining his life, demands the incorporation of alternative perspectives and voices because a single, constitutive story does not exist. Axel’s narration involves the recognition of the relativity of identity that makes any story only partial, a fragment of a larger cluster of often conflicting narratives.

Beyond the obvious duality of Axel Vander as both Axel and the young Jewish man who precedes him is a phalanx of selves that unsettle any claim for an authentic identity, a multitude of performances that Axel readily acknowledges: “I am, as is surely apparent by now, a thing made up wholly of poses” (210). Axel’s new, age-induced sensitivity to the fluidity of his own selfhood eventually moves him toward the other, enabling novel experiences of empathy and understanding. Axel’s poetic imagination moves him *in the direction of ambivalence*; indeed, the closer he becomes to Cass, the more the canny and uncanny seem to trade places, and even to converge. The uncanny vision narrative endows can move one into the space of ethical understanding since “it is exactly this double-take of difference and identity—experiencing oneself as another and the other as oneself—that provokes a reversal of our natural attitude to things and opens us to novel ways of seeing and being” (Kearney, *On Stories* 140).

Axel's experiences with Cass, and his self-alienating assumption of her narrative perspective, put Kearney's ethical claims for narrative into action. But redemption, even its possibility, comes with a price, demonstrated in the novel's final lines. Axel's narrative experiments expose him to the staggering responsibility that comes with insight. Cass's death, along with former lover Kristina Kovac's terminal cancer, produces a painful knowledge of interconnection and responsibility: "The city is quiet at this time of year. The dead, though, have their voice. The air through which I move is murmurous with absences. I shall soon be one of them. Good. Why should I have life and she have none? She. She" (257). Between presence and absence, sound and silence, life and death, Axel hovers in the liminal space of uncanny knowledge. The narrative becomes an overt exchange between self and other as Axel takes responsibility for animating Cass's narrative at his own expense. In *Shroud*, old age prompts a narrative revisitiation of the past that provides Axel with an uncanny vision of himself and Cass as simultaneously selves and others.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly self-reflexive life narratives need not be so dire or traumatic. For example, a novel such as *The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields is able to combine a multivocal point of view with a high degree of playfulness. The story of Daisy Goodwill is told from a narrative voice that shifts between first and third person, producing a twisting narrative in which the first-person narrator often views herself as a distinct character, referring to herself in the third person. The novel includes a variety of voices besides Daisy's, including characters who observe and interpret her, resulting in a multifaceted subject composed of many, often conflicting narratives. In chapters such as "Sorrow," the plethora of narrative voices attempting to explain

12. I recognize that my somewhat optimistic reading of Axel's appropriation of Cass's perspective overlooks Cass herself. There are a number of questions left to consider, particularly: What about Cass? Does she confront her own otherness through her interaction with Axel? Is she merely a rhetorical tool for Axel, a means to his own self-exploration? Axel himself acknowledges his exploitation, how he reached himself *through* her: "I used Cass Cleave as a test of my authentic being. No, no, more than that: I seized on her to be my authenticity itself. That was what I was rooting in her for, not pleasure or youth or the last few crumbs of life's grand feast, nothing so frivolous; she was my last chance to be me" (210). But such a blunt exposure of self-interest shows the glimmer of a new awareness of others and Axel's responsibility to them, if only expressed here in the negative. Since the novel is constructed as the product of a single narrator, the inclusion of sections from Cass's point of view is evidence of Axel's extended contemplation of the subjectivity of the other, indicating a new willingness to move away from the solipsism that has protected him from guilt and responsibility for so long. As indicated in the lines above, at the novel's conclusion, Axel's life appears only in relation to these lost others.

Daisy's depression creates a cubist effect, representing the subject from many perspectives at once, a multiplicity of views that emphasizes the difficulty of determining a single version of selfhood. This commingling of perspectives suggests that identity is a collision of roles, experiences, bodies, memories, opinions; subjects are always shifting and multiple. Writing of herself, Daisy undermines the possibility of true, authentic selves: "She is not always reliable when it comes to the details of her life; much of what she has to say is speculative, exaggerated, wildly unlikely. . . . Daisy Goodwill's perspective is off. Furthermore, she imposes the voice of the future on the events of the past, causing all manner of wavy distortion" (148). Daisy's narration self-reflexively draws attention to the impossibility of a single, true, linear life narrative, exposing the past as malleable, "distorted" by memory and narrative.

*The Stone Diaries* is an obvious allusion to Laurence's *Stone Angel*: both depict characters using memory to reconstruct their lives from childhood through old age and death. But while Laurence uses a single, definite perspective, to engage in life review, Shields employs multiple narrative perspectives in order to maintain ambiguity, undermining the demands of linear narrative and authentic selfhood. This contrast is most prominent in the title symbols: the stone angel in Laurence's novel is a grave marker that signifies family heritage and the blind pride that is Hagar's downfall. *The Stone Diaries* also contains a stone memorial; however, this creation is unnamed, unfinished, and nonrepresentational. The perpetually growing stone tower that Daisy's father erects after the death of her mother remains ambiguous, potentially meaningless. The widower simply cannot stop building, though the purpose of his labors remains obscure. Eventually the expanding tower becomes a kind of tourist attraction, drawing curious visitors who inevitably ascribe some imaginary meaning to the tower. The narrator relates such interpretations without comment, refusing to confirm or deny the structure's "true" meaning or purpose. Instead, the stone tower remains amorphous and impenetrable, both its physical and symbolic structures ever changing.

In both *Shroud* and *The Stone Diaries* the experience of old age enables a multifaceted look backward, a view that incorporates the protagonist as both subject and object. Near the end of Shields's novel, when the protagonist seems to narrate from beyond the grave, the shape-shifting narrator asks the question so central to life review, namely "What is the story of a life?" (340). The protagonist-narrator, Daisy Flett, tries to maintain a chronological narrative that moves through the trajectory of her life, "[t]o keep the weight of her memories evenly distributed. To hold the chapters

of her life in order” (340). Indeed, the novel itself is organized into discrete life stages, with chapters entitled “Birth, 1905,” “Childhood, 1916,” or “Illness and Decline, 1985.” Despite her ongoing efforts to “keep things straight,” Daisy is unable to avoid “spurious versions” that complicate the simple narrative trajectory of her life (340, 341). The novel’s incorporation of multiple narrative voices and of multiple (fictionalized) historical traces (archival photographs, newspaper clippings) belies the possibility of any “straight,” singular narrative. Daisy appears as both subject and object, but it is the onset of old age in particular that provokes the most radical dissolution of boundaries and an uncanny blurring of the self that presents Daisy Flett as a grandmother outside of the narratorial “I,” established at the novel’s opening as Daisy herself: “Does Grandma Flett actually say this last aloud? She’s not sure. She’s lost track of what’s real and what isn’t, and so, at this age, have I” (329). The multiple references to this single person (“Grandma Flett,” “she,” “I”) announce the uncanny vision of old age, the blurring of selves and of stories, of reality and fiction initiated by the dizzying project of life review.

As in *Shroud*, narrative in *The Stone Diaries* at once reveals and upends identity, complicating the narrator’s (and perhaps the reader’s) desire for a discrete, knowable self. This is part of the uncanniness of aging into old age—the proliferation of stories tangles the narrative thread subjects seek to tease out. Even beyond this proliferation of stories, the uncanny position of the older person can initiate a more extreme recognition as awareness of multiplicity leads to glimpses of one’s own alterity. The replacement of autonomous, discrete “life review” with multiple versions can lead one into the often disorienting space between self and other, a glimpse of oneself as another that means the discovery of uncanny identity.

## STRANGERS, FAMILIARS

### Cynthia Scott’s *The Company of Strangers*

So far, my analysis of life review narratives has dealt with novels largely concerned with a particular narrating subject. Though *Shroud* and *The Stone Diaries* employ a number of narrative strategies that facilitate a variable point of view, both novels have easily identifiable protagonists, central characters whose stories, though various and shifting, are the narrative’s primary concern. *The Stone Angel* is clearly Hagar Shipley’s narrative, just as *Shroud* is Axel Vander’s, and *Stone Diaries* is Daisy Flett’s. The film *The Company of Strangers* (1990), directed by Cynthia Scott, eschews such a

restricted focus, depicting instead a group of self-reflexive older characters chatting, singing, dancing, fishing, eating, gazing, and of course, reminiscing. The film's very loose narrative involves this group of women on a bus tour of Quebec. During a detour from their route to see the country place where a member of the group, Constance, "spent the best years of her childhood," the group becomes stranded in the wilderness. There is little sense of urgency over their situation, and the "company," which includes seven women age sixty-five and older, along with their twenty-seven-year-old bus driver, are variously shown exploring the landscape, admiring the views, playing cards, and watching the birds. The minimal plot, easily summarized—the bus breaks down, the women take refuge in an abandoned house and spend a few days in this pastoral wilderness before being rescued by a seaplane—allows for the inclusion of various narrative fragments, anecdotal discussions of personal histories, reflections on present aches and pains, and scenes of quiet gazing in which solitary characters are afforded time to look and think.

In a sense, my analysis of the film takes its cue from its title, *The Company of Strangers*, which draws attention to the cohabitation of familiar and strange.<sup>13</sup> I argue that the film maintains the paradox of its title, the older women existing as both "strangers" and "company" for the film's audience as well as for one another. The film provides space for many small narratives of the past, of daily existence, of old age, that do not easily fit together in service of a larger plot. As a result, spectators glimpse the multiple locations of identity, coming to know something about each character, without necessarily knowing the character. That is, the fragments available to us create not whole portraits but splintered representations that dispel any fantasies of complete or fixed identity. The women self-consciously reflect on old age and tell stories of their pasts, but these narratives are partnered with the dynamism of life in the present, and the creation of new narratives.

The film's hybrid genre, which blends fiction and fact, scripted and improvised dialogue, contributes to and even facilitates the fluctuating position of each woman as subject/object, aging/aged, familiar/strange. The film's generic instability, the hovering between categories of "authentic" and staged, is just one of many productive instabilities that mark *The*

13. *The Company of Strangers* is the film's Canadian title. In the United States, the film was released under the title *Strangers in Good Company*, a title that, though maintaining the cohabitation of the original Canadian title, loses, I believe, some of the uncanny potential of the former.

*Company of Strangers*.<sup>14</sup> Made in the tradition of the National Film Board of Canada's Alternative Drama program, the film combines conventions of fictional filmmaking (dramatic contrivance, some scripting) with those of the documentary (a cast of nonactors, the use of actual personal histories and photographs) (Stukator, "Pictures" 239). Angela Stukator identifies this incorporation of typically antithetical generic conventions as one of great political potential, able to "challenge a number of related distinctions," including "story and history, fabrication and 'truth,' performance and being, concealment and appearance" (240). Catherine Russell also analyzes the film's many instabilities, particularly its creation of a "complex spectatorial position, one which is at once fixed and shifting" (213). However, she is critical of such instability: "If the film has an ideal spectator, it is not me, or anyone else who can see through its occasionally awkward staging, its tokenist selection of women, and its shaky narrative premises. . . . Neither an art film, nor a feminist film, *The Company of Strangers* offers a disjunctive, dislocated form of address" (213). I see more positive potential in *Company's* unstable generic status and its inclusion of multiple, disparate narratives, which challenge narrative totality and identity synthesis.

The hybrid genre, which allows for a very loose narrative structure, facilitates the preservation of difference within the creation of "company." Over the course of the film each of the seven women tells stories about her life, reminiscing about youth, motherhood, love, illness, death, and mourning.<sup>15</sup> These anecdotal narratives provide the various characters with the

14. The more recent, seemingly oxymoronic phenomenon of "reality television" also tests our definitions of truth and reality, but with very different results. In these programs, authenticity is emphasized, as the genre title attests, and the role of staging, scripting, and other forms of crew interference is strenuously denied, whereas *The Company of Strangers* maintains, and even nurtures, an ambiguity of genre and origins.

15. It is the seven older women who are the primary storytellers. We learn nearly nothing about Michelle, the young bus driver. Instead of telling stories, she functions more like an interviewer, asking questions rather than answering them. The exclusion of her narratives is evidence of the film's devotion to the older women; *The Company of Strangers* is a film about women over the age of sixty, and as a result Michelle must remain marginal. Interestingly, even the youngest of the "older" group, Catherine, age sixty-five, remains somewhat peripheral—she tells fewer anecdotes and is given less screen time than the other six. We see her listening to devotional music and attempting to fix the bus; she explains to Michelle that she is "married to God," but we learn little else about her life history. Such inattention enacts a reversal of traditional characterization: the older women are the most developed characters, while the younger women seem almost unknown and more prone to stereotyping.

opportunity to explain themselves, to understand and express themselves as selves in accordance with models of narrative identity. Unlike exhaustive and analytical life review, anecdotes are brief and fragmentary, presenting a particular memory that provides only one aspect of a character's narrative identity. These anecdotes fall into the category of "reminiscence," the manner of recollecting Woodward identifies as "generative and restorative" potential, able to "generate the future for the reminiscing subject and not just to revivify the past" ("Telling Stories" 151, 160). In *The Company of Strangers* a variety of kinds of memorializing occur, resulting in a heterogeneous collection of narratives that also challenge the teleological or evaluative efforts of "life review." Certainly identity arises from narrative in *The Company of Strangers*, but the variety and fragmentation of these narratives facilitate a fluidity of identity that maintains strangeness, gaps, and even otherness.

The identifying narratives in the film occur in conversation, the characters functioning as audiences for one another, surrogates for the film's larger audience of spectators. Mary tells Cissy of the struggles she faced as a lesbian in the entirely heteronormative and largely homophobic society of her youth. Cissy tells Mary of the stroke that left her paralyzed, laid up in the hospital for weeks counting windowpanes. Later, Winnie describes to Alice her monotonous job in a cigarette factory during her youth and Alice responds with an anecdote about her own "sleepy" factory job, wiping bottles before fixing them with a ribbon. Constance talks bitterly of her art studies relinquished for motherhood, her life overtaken by the responsibilities of "mating and breeding." Catherine speaks of her devotion to God. Beth sadly recalls the death of her son, which has overshadowed her life. These are only a sampling of the anecdotal narratives that compose the film, stories that show how "everybody's life is more or less interesting," as Mary claims, because, as Cissy concurs, each one is "a drama."<sup>16</sup> In her analysis of the personal histories Russell claims the "fragments of biography" focus primarily on sacrificial stories, describing the women's narratives as largely determined by "devotion to family, or, in the case of Catherine, to the Church" (215). Russell employs as evidence some of the film's most painful anecdotes: Constance's abandoned studies, Cissy's fear of losing her only son, Beth's loss, Alice's hatred of her first husband (215). By limiting her discussion to narratives of loss, Russell is able to construe Scott's "filmmaking process [as] a mechanism of redemp-

16. Catherine Russell would disagree with such optimism, describing the women's lives as "really rather banal" (213).

tion” (218), stressing the film’s activation of pathos in the viewer. But what of the less obviously “sacrificial” narratives, what of the many scenes that affirm presence and activity? I believe it is the tension *between* absence and presence in the film, in the wide variety of narratives presented, that is part of its productive potential.

Alongside the conversational narrative anecdotes, the film includes scenes of nonverbal physicality, quiet moments of looking, as well as scenes of everyday activity, such as dancing, eating, playing cards. The activities in the present suggest that the women’s life stories do not have an obvious teleology, but instead, remain very much in process and undetermined. Though the film’s loose narrative works toward a climax (the arrival of the seaplane), it lacks clear movement toward this moment; there is no great central conflict or lesson learned. Indeed, as Stukator argues, the prolonged images of the various women quietly gazing and thinking actually serve the “film’s project of challenging fixed, stable terms of identity,” since such images delay the film’s narrative flow and interrupt its dominant style (242). I would take this argument even further: the diegetic<sup>17</sup> silences are an assertion of the present tense, of presence that counters pastness and the loss inherent in recollection. In these quiet moments the characters most powerfully function as others; the familiarity of candid conversations and anecdotes is replaced by silence, their subjectivity rendered opaque.

Though in some sense *The Company of Strangers* portrays old age as a time of reflection and thoughtfulness, an association strengthened by the pastoral setting and the soundtrack of Schubert and Chopin, it does not smooth over the cracks in such a peaceful façade, acknowledging that this Romantic depiction is only a partial portrait. There is much talk of discomfort, hunger, loneliness, pain, fear, and longing, and these tensions, along with the incorporation of multiple contradictions of old age as a time of fullness and lack, of continuing life and a growing attention to the unavoidability of death, that together give the film its power. The performers themselves express the film’s incorporation of differences. In her discussion of the film in her memoir on its making, Mary Meigs recalls a conversation with Winifred Holden after viewing the completed film. Winnie was disappointed with the film: “Nothing happens,” she said. Mary responded: “I tell her that *we* are happening. The film is about seven semi-old women and a young woman happening” (qtd. in Russell 217).

17. I use the term “diegesis,” following convention in film analysis, to refer to “the world of the film’s story. The diegesis includes events that are presumed to have occurred and actions and spaces not shown onscreen” (Bordwell and Thompson 478).

In addition to the “happening” expressed in conversation and (often silent) activity, the film registers aging and time in the sequencing of static images, as the film’s diegesis is repeatedly ruptured by brief photomontages that thrust viewers into self-conscious spectatorship. Each montage includes photographs of one of the seven older women at various ages. These montages are staggered throughout the film so that each is a surprise interruption of the narrative. Even more than the scenes of silent gazing that Stukator identifies, these photographic clusters disrupt the film’s narrative, confronting viewers with the drastic changes of age by including images of the characters as children, young women, and mature women in quick succession. Set against the dynamic presence of the various women in the film’s diegesis, these static images present viewers with the difficulty of comprehending a temporal identity that renders a subject both absent and present. These photographs function as historical traces that provide yet another identity fragment in the film, undermining the possibility of narrative totality or identity synthesis. Unnarrated, unexplained, these images are evidence of unknown histories, alerting viewers to the vast store of untold stories, the persistent mysteriousness of these characters in spite of all the audience sees and hears. Like the various strategies of representation (anecdotes and conversation, physical activity and quiet contemplation) that provide glimpses of the women as both storied subjects and opaque strangers, these “insufficient, inconclusive” photomontages (Stukator 248) remind viewers of the temporality of identity, producing paradoxical images that, in their sequencing, both halt and signify the passage of time. There is something here of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, his famous observation of the disintegrative power of the photograph, which is “like old age: even in its splendor, it disincarnates the face, manifests its genetic evidence” (105). Barthes suggests that photographs inevitably involve comparative viewing; one sees both the image and its genetic referents, and as such, the photographic subject is always paradoxically represented and obscured. Photographs inevitably reveal the temporal subject as the image becomes a piece of comparative evidence, a single moment always referencing a multitude of others.

The photographic montages in *The Company of Strangers* are just one of the many filmic and narrative devices that engage the paradoxes and uncanniness of aging, temporality, and narrative identity. There are no narrative synopses at the film’s conclusion, those common “summing up” sentences that appear after biographical and documentary films that allow us to envision lives in totality, satisfying our desires for finality. Instead, all of the women are very much *in process* at the film’s end. Both the open-

ing and final scenes depict the women in long and medium shots, walking through the misty wilderness. The *mise-en-scène*—that is, all that one sees within the camera's frame—provides no indication of either their origins or their destinations, and as a result the image emphasizes the activity itself, the ambulatory women *in motion*. These framing scenes of ambiguously directed movement assert in visual terms the dynamism inherent in the shouts of “We’re alive!” that the women send into the darkness midway through the film. The images of movement without obvious beginning or ending provide a powerful metaphor for the uncanny selfhood produced by aging: the women are at once present and absent, in time, in space.

Perhaps more than anything, the film is a meditation on time, on the interaction of the memoried past and the active present that undermines our longing for stability. The multiple and disparate stories, images, and activities produce each character, each narrative subject, as a network, at once both teller and listener, aging and aged, subject and object. This constant fluctuation brings the women, and, I would argue, the spectator as well, into the space of Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics where subjects begin to recognize the “interconnections between the poles of sameness and strangeness” (*Strangers* 10). Such liminality can certainly be uncanny since it involves a blurring of boundaries and often the cohabitation of opposites. Age positions subjects within such a liminal space between self and other in its temporal fluidity; we are always the same and changing, ourselves and yet another. Change can be frightening, and there are many examples of aging into old age depicted as painful, if not horrifying, in popular films such as *Cocoon*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Death Becomes Her*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*. A film such as *The Company of Strangers*, however, provides an alternative vision of unstable, temporal identity, one without horror.

Life review typically depends on a perspective of life as a singular narrative, interpreting old age as an Eriksonian culmination that can reveal life's overall purpose. In these terms, *Shroud*, *The Stone Diaries*, and, to some extent, *The Stone Angel* function as problematized life review narratives in their self-reflexive interrogation of the life narrative prototype, revealing instability and multiplicity where the narrator (and often the reader) expect some teleological clarity (recall Hagar's final fragment, Axel's shifting point of view). As these interrogative life review fictions make clear, the division between evaluative, analytical review and restorative, fragmentary reminiscence is often indistinct. These four texts, *The Stone Angel*, *Shroud*, *The Stone Diaries*, and *The Company of Strangers*, depict various permutations of the project of life review, that is, the

various ways one can write and read a life. In *The Stone Angel* the reflective narrator uses memory to chart a chronological past, alternating between reminiscence and present-day action, a dualist pattern that reveals a split subject struggling to negotiate between competing selves: rational and corporeal, past and present, polite and authentic. Hagar attempts to construct a metanarrative of self (albeit a self in conflict) that produces, and explains, a distinct subject moving through time in an orderly fashion. In *Shroud*, and also *The Stone Diaries*, the illusion of a unified metanarrative of self dissolves as the narrator confronts and explores the legacy of a history of poses and performance. In Banville's novel, the appropriation of various identities haunts the narrator but also potentially enlightens him, moving him toward an ethical awareness he had previously evaded. Narrative identity's fluidity, its openness to revision, becomes obvious as Axel Vander experiments with both storytelling and narrative interpretation in his exploration of his various pasts. His very name resonates with his shifting status, his pluralism. Axel is a site of change, a pivot on which various subjectivities turn, suggesting an identity at once fixed and variable.

*The Company of Strangers* further emphasizes this fluidity, portraying characters in the process of aging, the ongoing project of composing and revising their life narratives. These texts show how "life review" is never fully finished, or even successful, since summation and exhaustive analysis are invariably thwarted by the progress of time. These characters explore, to varying degrees, the uncanny instability produced by mortal life, which consistently replaces the singular with the multiple, the authentic self with an ever-expanding number of versions.