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## Uncanny Subjects

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## CHAPTER TWO

# TROUBLING VERSIONS

## Dementia and Identity

*[M]anifestations of insanity . . . excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity.*

—Freud, “The Uncanny” 347

**I**N HIS personal essay documenting his father’s struggle with Alzheimer’s disease, Jonathan Franzen explains the necessity of his narrative intervention: “This was his disease. It was also, you could argue, his story. But you have to let me tell it” (*How to Be Alone* 11). Franzen’s remarks imply the common association between lives and stories explored in chapter 1: human lives are embedded in narrative, though whether by nature (life as a linear progress toward the telos of death) or culture (a narrative-based society that influences our interpretations of aging life as a developmental “course” or “cycle”) remains open to debate. But this theoretical truism, the belief that identity is based on, if not composed of, narrative, becomes problematic for those who are alienated from narrative and narration by illness and disability. Sometimes aging into old age brings disturbing changes that cannot be concealed by any facades of fixity. Later-life dementia, such as that caused by Alzheimer’s, involves an alteration of the brain’s physiology that results in an erosion of memory and language skills that puts incredible strain on a stable selfhood maintained by narrative. Narrative ability is greatly debilitated as victims of dementia become increasingly unable to access and employ memory in the service of language and

storytelling. Narrative-based ontologies cast doubt on the continuation of selfhood in cases of dementia. As the disintegration of memory diminishes victims' narrative capability, friends and families may come to see them as strange, and even frightening, others.

Dementia is a condition that forces witnesses (family members, friends, health care providers) to respond to sufferers and the obligations they represent, a potentially crushing responsibility for another's welfare. The impossible yet necessary task of accompanying victims through the alarming disorder of their memory introduces one in painfully real terms to the exhausting demands of ethical responsibility. This is the responsibility of the witness who must, like the psychoanalyst, retain the sufferer's narrative with the hope of returning it to him or her, in an altered, mollifying form, a gift the sufferer can rarely acknowledge or even accept. Narratives of dementia inevitably involve the transfer of narrative authority to another as storytelling abilities diminish, rendering the identification of selfhood a secondary concern. More important are the issues of ethical responsibility and the politics of witnessing and testimony. The drastic changes imposed by dementia expose the radical impermanence of our temporal condition. Though it is certainly true that many people who age into old age will not suffer from dementia, awareness of its debilitating power casts a heavy shadow over our apprehensions of aging. The aversion to dementia provokes Christine Cassel, former president of the American College of Physicians, to label "dementing illness . . . the single most powerful factor in the negative attitudes about aging that occur in our society and throughout the world. . . . The stereotype of the elderly person as inevitably 'losing it' is an enormous barrier to progress in productive aging" (x). As a primary source of the overriding dread of old age, dementia is an age-related disability that demands inquiry.

## MEMORY AND FORGETTING

Cognitive science teaches that memory is unstable, even in physiological terms. The past is at least partly created by one's recollections since memories are, in a sense, both strengthened and altered by the very act of remembering. Neurological models of memory can help to confirm the unavoidable nonfixity of the memoried past, revealing how the recollection of an event is simultaneously the construction of an event (Eakin, *Making Selves* 106). To a certain degree, the past serves the subject's narrative purposes. As Eakin remarks in his study of autobiography and identity,

“students of memory today hold that past experience is necessarily—both psychologically and neurologically—*constructed* anew in each memory event or act of recall. Memories, then, are constructed, and memory itself, moreover, is plural” (107, original emphasis). According to these models, memories are often “actually memories of memories” (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 27), rather than memories of an actual experience.

Jonathan Franzen draws on recent neurological research to explain how the “brain is not an album in which memories are stored discretely like unchanging photographs”; instead, each memory is an “approximate excitation of neural circuits that bind a set of sensory images and semantic data into the momentary sensation of a remembered whole. These images and data are seldom the exclusive property of one particular memory” (Franzen 8). As a result, memories are largely interconnected and easily triggered by excitation of related regions of the brain, forming a “constellation” that is preserved through the very act of remembering. Memories must be recalled to remain memories, since “each succeeding recollection and retelling reinforces the constellation of images and knowledge that constitute the memory. At the cellular level, according to neuroscientists, I’m burning the memory in a little deeper each time, strengthening the dendritic connections among its components, further encouraging the firing of that specific set of synapses” (Franzen 9). In these terms, narrative is not simply the emplotment of memory; memory itself is created by its telling. Storytelling at once confirms and even creates memory, since that which is not repeatedly recalled is easily lost. A useful image for considering the action of memory is the palimpsest, a continually reinscribed parchment upon which each recollected text supersedes the previous one. Palimpsestic memory involves endlessly recalled and retold narratives that inevitably obscure the supposedly original recollected experience. As a result, remembering and telling the past at once recapture and replace what came before, in effect dissolving the previous memory. The process of endless substitution involved in the very mechanics of memory calls into question the simple, intuitive expectation of correlation between one’s memory of a thing and the thing itself. Instead, memory is itself an unstable process in which connections are easily and continuously modified.

The other side of this substitutive memorial process is the larger, constant action of forgetting. Almost everything in one’s life remains unremembered, a phenomenon both remarkable and unsettling. This “great adaptive [virtue] of our brains, [that is] our ability to forget almost everything that has ever happened to us,” dooms us to unavoidable but necessary loss (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 9). Herbert Blau finds this unstoppable

forgetting responsible for the frequent unfulfillment experienced as one enters later life: “there is . . . a perturbation of aging that comes, just over the threshold of consciousness from want of consciousness, a last sad intimation of the life we’ve never lived because essentially unremembered, so that there is a sense of having suffered somehow an irreparable loss that, because not known, we cannot even mourn” (Blau 34). Such profound forgetting is tied to the uncanny in its referencing of the absent. We do not know what we have forgotten (almost all of our daily actions since birth), yet we know that we have forgotten. The remarkable persistence of forgetting, though essential for day-to-day functioning, means that subjects are always haunted by “intimations of the life we’ve never lived.”

Dementia is a pathological experience of the unsettling forgotten life. And it is here, I argue, that fiction and filmmaking step in, representational arts at once preserving and mourning what has been lost. Perhaps dementia—an inevitable process of forgetting and loss—is a grotesque exaggeration of what human temporality, our condition as aging subjects, enacts. The very terminology of “remembering” points to its corrective force: “Etymology tells us that to remember is to ‘piece together,’ to ‘recollect’ is to gather again what has been lost. In this sense, memory is always recuperative, restorative, an act of reclamation” (Small 64). The term “recollect” has an even more obvious restorative function. One re-collects that which has been scattered; remembering inevitably grapples with loss.

Narrative identity involves a complex matrix of self that includes experience, storytelling, and story-listening. As explored in the previous chapter, Ricoeur understands selfhood as a telling-effect:<sup>1</sup> “Our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity. We recognize ourselves in the stories that we tell about ourselves. It makes very little difference whether these stories are true or false, fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with an identity” (qtd. in Kerby 40–41). Kerby expands the claim, suggesting that identity is formed as much by our own storytelling as by our appearance as “a character” in other people’s narratives (40). The inseparability of existing as a person and telling stories of that existence implies that those unable to tell their stories face serious

1. I borrow this terminology from Paul John Eakin, whose article in the journal *Narrative* explores identity according to cognitive science models. In particular he uses the work of Antonia Damasio to argue that “instead of a teller, there is only—and persistently—what we might call a *teller-effect*, a self that emerges and lives its life only within the narrative matrix of consciousness” (“What Are We Reading” 129, emphasis added).

impediments to functioning as subjects.<sup>2</sup> The person unable to articulate his or her stories is no less a subject but is increasingly dependent on others to assist in narrativization, in review and interpretation. Is a subject unable to tell his or her stories not a self? Can others tell the victim's stories without a loss of that victim's selfhood? Considering these questions can contribute to a better understanding of the function and consequences of the narrative problems that often occur in later life.

## AGING AND DEMENTIA

Unfortunately, medical research suggests that merely aging into old age seriously increases one's risk of developing dementia—most commonly as a result of Alzheimer's disease or vascular dementia (see Rockwood and Lindsay 6). Many of the extreme impairments (acute confusion, hallucinations) associated with dementia fall under the category of delirium—indeed the two conditions are often difficult to distinguish, and age is also a primary risk factor for delirium (Rockwood and Lindsay 5–6). In fact, researchers claim that “late-onset Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia appeared to have a stronger association with delirium than did early-onset Alzheimer's disease and frontotemporal dementia” (Lindsay, Rockwood, and Rolfsen 38–39). According to the Alzheimer's Association, “increasing age is the greatest risk factor for Alzheimer's. One in 10 individuals over 65 and nearly half over 85 are affected” (“Fact Sheet: Alzheimer's Disease Statistics”; see also Sabat).

The difficulty of narrativizing dementia draws attention to the relation between experience, or the raw “material” of narrative, and the mimetic project of representing that material. As discussed earlier, the relationship between events of the supposed real world and their narrative emplotment is a vexed one. Counter to commonsensical notions of narrative representation, narrative theorists demonstrate that the interaction between events and their narrative presentation may be less discrete than they first appear. The relationship between narrative and identity works much like the

2. My work on this chapter has shown me that “caregiving” is a highly complicated response to witnessing. In this chapter I limit my discussion to caregiving provided by children and spouses, though I realize that much of the responsibility for the welfare of dementia victims falls on various professional caregivers, including doctors, nurses, and home health aides. Financial remuneration triangulates the patient/caregiver dyad by introducing the figure of the remunerator, an alteration with serious repercussions for the theorization of responsibility and obligation.

“double logic” theory of narrative that Porter Abbott takes from Jonathan Culler. Within this model, “story appears both to precede *and* to come after narrative discourse” (Abbott, *Narrative* 18, original emphasis).<sup>3</sup> By substituting the term “identity” for “story,” one sees clearly the paradox of narrative identity in which presentation appears as *re*-presentation, formulation as illustration; in other words, when subjects tell stories about themselves they are creating selves. The “I” expressed via narrative cannot exist without this narrative apparatus, and the narrative apparatus is predicated upon the “I” subject.

By extension, the question of whether identity is located in embodied experience or in its narrative communication is pre-empted by objections to such a division itself. Certainly, self-*understanding* seems to be the result of storytelling, drawing the other into one’s experience of self: “We accept that we are narrative beings because the shortest road from self to self is through the other” (Kearney, *Strangers* 231). The reduced self-understanding available to victims of dementia is one of many ways that sufferers become dependent on others. In cases of dementia, storytelling does not necessarily disappear, but the narratives that remain become increasingly opaque to listeners, consisting often of noncontextualized narrative fragments or even nonsense. As a result, understanding becomes increasingly collaborative for sufferers of dementia. As Franzen reminds his readers, it is his father’s story; but we must let the son tell it. As the many caregiver support groups make clear, diseases such as Alzheimer’s place grave demands on caregivers,<sup>4</sup> not least of which is assisting sufferers in their

3. Culler’s explication of “a certain self-deconstructive force in narrative and the theory of narrative” reveals how story (the events that purportedly make up a narrative) and discourse (the presentation of events) are not as discrete as narratologists would like (187). “Analysis of narrative depends . . . on the distinction between story and discourse, and this distinction always involves a relation of dependency. . . . Since the distinction between story and discourse can function only if there is a determination of one by the other, the analyst must always choose which will be treated as the given and which as the product” (186). Culler argues that both the assumption that discourse is the presentation of a pre-existing story and that the belief that “events” are nothing other than products of discourse” blind critics to the double logic of story and discourse (186). His analysis has interesting parallels with narrative identity: as simultaneous reader and writer of his or her stories, the subject at once shapes and is shaped by narrative.

4. Eva Kittay’s work on the ethics of care emphasizes the needs and dependencies that result from caregiving, stressing the “nested dependencies” that result from human interdependence. She champions the notion of “*doulia*,” shifting the original Greek definition of servant or slave to a more reciprocal meaning, using the term to “signify instead a caregiver who cares for those who care for others” (107). According to

negotiation of an unremembered, nonnarrative, and, consequently, largely incomprehensible existence.

The collaborative dimensions of the caregiver-patient relationship demonstrate the potential of assisted identity, the possibility that dementia might diminish the chasm between self and other, enforcing a subjectivity of exchange. This is counterintuitive since, as the many victims of dementia know (here I refer to both the afflicted and those who care for them), much of the pain of dementia comes from its alienating effect. The opportunities for communication and understanding are seriously diminished. But it is these very difficulties that may increase the potential for, indeed may enforce, ethical insight in the caregiver. I argue that dementia often forces its responsive witnesses into a Levinasian interaction with the other. In their exaggerated otherness, victims of dementia demand an unfulfillable responsibility, and caregivers experience in everyday terms the difficulty, often the impossibility, of responding to the basic obligation that the other represents. According to Levinas, the other takes the self “hostage,” but it is this position of subordination that is necessary for ethical relations: “It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity—even the little there is, even the simple ‘After you, sir.’ The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity” (*Otherwise* 17). In an interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas further explained the restructuring of identity that is concomitant with ethical awareness: “The ethical exigency to be responsible for the other undermines the ontological primacy of the meaning of being; it unsettles the natural and political positions we have taken up in the world and predisposes us to a meaning that is other than being, that is otherwise than being (*autrement qu’être*)” (23). Later-life dementia often has such a rattling effect, enforcing a kind of Levinasian subordination with ontological implications for both witnesses and sufferers.

Because narratives of dementia are unavoidably collaborative, there is the potential in these narratives for the victim to be more than simply strange, more than a pathological object. An ethical, empathetic interaction can reveal the “patient” as in fact an uncanny subject, an exaggerated embodiment of difference, of radical impermanence. Dementia provides caregivers, storytellers, with dramatic lessons on uncanny identity. Not

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Kittay’s “principle of *doulia*,” “Just as we have required care to survive and thrive, so we need to provide conditions that allow others—including those who do the work of caring—to receive the care they need to survive and thrive” (107, original emphasis).

only is there the obvious uncanniness of the victim whose deteriorated memory produces a frightening strangeness, but there is often self-revelation for the storyteller who comes to recognize his or her own otherness in the process of collaborating with the afflicted.

The power of narrative to alter perspective is central to theories of empathy: catharsis allows us to experience the suffering of others “*as if* we were them. . . . And 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). This vision of narrative catharsis echoes the uncanny in its pattern of reversals and double vision. Indeed, Royle characterizes the very acts of writing and reading as unavoidably uncanny: “One tries to keep oneself out, but one cannot. One tries to put oneself in: same result. The uncanny is an experience of being after oneself, in various senses of that phrase” (16). I propose that narratives of dementia accentuate these uncanny and cathartic, even uncannily cathartic, potentials of narrative. As I have tried to demonstrate, old age and, more specifically, narratives of old age are involved in this process of revelation, since aging into old age exposes temporality and the concomitant instability of selfhood. Narratives of late-life dementia, such as that caused by Alzheimer’s disease, exaggerate this revelation, exposing the radical instability of temporal identity and the ethical demands it initiates.

## TELLING OTHER PEOPLE’S STORIES

Dementia is such a disturbing sign of disease largely because it denies sufferers the ability to “be themselves” as they lose their memory and, therefore, their stories. As a result, the subjective experience of dementia, particularly of its late stages, remains largely unknown since it destroys precisely those tools necessary to produce a coherent life story.<sup>5</sup> What do exist, however, are narratives by the survivors of dementia, that is, stories (in both memoirs and fiction) told by caregivers that speak to the ethical crises provoked by the condition, the difficulty of assisting a person who often cannot acknowledge, or perhaps even tolerate, help.<sup>6</sup> Though subjec-

5. I have come across a few first-person accounts of the disease: *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer’s*, by Thomas DeBaggio; and *My Journey into Alzheimer’s Disease*, by Robert Davis. The latter includes material written by the author’s wife, Betty, continuing the trend of witnesses speaking for the afflicted.

6. There are a number of nonfictional memoirs written by witnesses. A sampling

tive depictions of dementia are often impossible, fiction can provide an imaginative construction of dementia. But even those that offer an inside view, as it were, of the disease can go only so far. The dark final stages of dementia may be beyond the reach of representation or imagination. Novels such as Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version*, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, and Jeffrey Moore's *The Memory Artists*, which present compelling self-portraits of dementia in fiction narrated or focalized by victims of the condition, are unable to continue this fictional conceit into the later stages of disorientation. The deterioration of language skills is an insurmountable obstacle to linguistic communication. In all instances the writers overcome this obstacle by transferring the narration to a caregiving child.<sup>7</sup>

The practice of telling other people's stories has its own difficult politics. An ethical relationship between teller and subject, particularly in cases involving dementia and other memory disorders, depends on a careful balance of empathy and respect, a conscientious negotiation of the difficult terrain between outright rejection and debilitating identification. The problem posed by subjects unable to tell their stories has been considered by many critics; in particular, trauma theorists have explored the complicated interrelationship of witnessing and testimonial, empathy and identification.<sup>8</sup> There are important differences between trauma and dementia, the most prominent being the source of the condition as situational or biological. Sufferers of Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, or vascular dementia, for example, have little to no capacity to control their condition, since their memories become physiologically unavailable as the brain is devastated by the disease. But there are similarities in the symptoms of trauma and dementia: involuntary repetition, confusion, hallucination, and of course

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of titles includes *Remind Me Who I Am, Again*, by Linda Grant; *The House on Beartown Road: A Memoir of Learning and Forgetting*, by Elizabeth Cohen; *The Story of My Father*, by Sue Miller; *Dancing on Quicksand: A Gift of Friendship in the Age of Alzheimer's*, by Marilyn Mitchell; and *Do You Remember Me?: A Father, a Daughter, and a Search for the Self*, by Judith Levine.

7. Interestingly, in all three examples it is a son who provides the primary (narrative) care, regardless of the sex of the victim, a reversal of demographic trends, which confirm that care providers are actually predominantly women. A quick survey of the texts that make up the bulk of this chapter reveals a continuation of this reversal, men caring for afflicted loved ones, both male and female, the only exception being Alice Munro's "Spelling." The preponderance of male caregivers and the gendered implications of dementia are issues I return to in the chapter's conclusion.

8. I refer here primarily to the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshona Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Dominick LaCapra, and Dori Laub.

memory loss. Both conditions inhibit communication and result in the disappearance of memories that may re-emerge unexpectedly, though this is more likely in cases of psychological trauma. As a result, trauma theory has something to offer an analysis of narratives of dementia, particularly in its theorization of witnessing and testimonial, and the potentials and perils of telling other people's stories.

To a large extent the sufferer of dementia is unable to give testimony, a narrative process that Dori Laub has described as essential for restoring the past to the victim of trauma (69–70). Pathological memory disorders such as Alzheimer's work in the opposite way to psychological trauma. Inconceivable horrors such as those suffered by victims of the Holocaust can only be witnessed "belatedly" as a result of "human cognitive capacity to perceive and to assimilate the totality of what was really happening at the time" (Laub 69). Dementia reverses this process of revelation as sufferers' testimonial potential, their ability to act as witnesses to their own experiences, lessens over time. Laub describes the important role of the "interviewer-listener" in Holocaust testimonial, his or her "responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he [or she] bore alone, and therefore could not carry out. It is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener that makes possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing" (69). This kind of reciprocal collaboration is often not possible for victims of dementia; indeed, the very language of the "survivor" is incongruous since later-life dementia is typically the result of a fatal disease, the most prominent being Alzheimer's.

Though there can be no "survivors" of Alzheimer's, testimony remains important, the responsibility of witnessing transferred onto caregivers, who are most often family members, typically spouses or children of the afflicted. Witnessing is a serious responsibility that involves a difficult integration of past and present narratives, an integration the afflicted cannot manage. The dialogic aspects of testimony and witnessing become increasingly difficult to sustain as dementia worsens and the victim's narrative speech becomes incomprehensible, or even unavailable. Traditional efforts at witnessing trauma involve "facing loss," those losses too terrible for comprehension that refuse to inhabit only the past, persisting instead as ghosts that haunt the victim. For victims of dementia and their caregivers, loss is a continual process, and the future can promise only further debilitation and disappearance. Dementia often produces what Felman calls "*involuntary witness[es]*," reluctant caregivers forced to observe the dissolution of their loved one (Felman and Laub 4, original emphasis).

“The contemporary writer,” argues Felman, “often dramatizes the predicament (whether chosen or imposed, whether conscious or unconscious) of a voluntary or of an unwitting, inadvertent, and sometimes *involuntary witness*: witness to a trauma, to a crime or to an outrage; witness to a horror or an illness whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization” (4, original emphasis). Felman explicitly connects the compulsion to witness and testify with the mortal threat of disease: “what alerts and mobilizes the attention of the witness and what necessitates the testimony is always fundamentally, in one way or another, the scandal of an illness, of a metaphorical or literal disease” (4–5). Contemporary fiction dealing with the frightening trauma of later-life dementia grapples with the difficult, even dangerous, interaction of the afflicted and his or her witness. Such illness tests the limits of witnessing and testimonial—how does one ethically listen when the sufferer is no longer able to testify? Later-life dementia forces the witness into a position of interpreter that complicates a common association of the witness with truth-finding and the preservation of history. Witnessing and testimonial inevitably involve exchange, a blending of perspectives and stories as witnesses become involved in the testimony they receive. As mediums, witnesses become collaborators, and in cases of dementia such participation often becomes increasingly active. Merely listening becomes inadequate when the victim can no longer use language to tell stories; at such a point the roles bleed into one another: the caregiver provides the testimony the victim can no longer formulate. As Franzen writes of his father, “It was . . . his story. But you have to let me tell it.” It may be the case that the very act of witnessing is unavoidably involved in integration and transgression: “The witness . . . testifies to what has been said *through* him. Because the witness has said ‘here I am’ before the other” (Levinas qtd. in Felman 3, original emphasis). Later-life dementia may disrupt the discrete categories of witness and other. The witness is a medium, but often an originating speaker as well, forced to salvage, repair, sustain, and even create narratives that have been damaged or erased.

The potential for collaborative understanding is part of the ethical potential of literary and film narrative practice as an illuminating exchange between self and other that allows readers and viewers to glimpse their own difference. As discussed above, Kearney privileges narrative-induced empathy as a highly productive and redemptive goal, as the primary means for attaining ethical human interaction (*On Stories* 62–63). Likewise, Ann Whitehead characterizes narrative exchange as an “ethical practice,” particularly in trauma studies, that works to “return to the patient his or her

own story” (8). Returning a story often means speaking *for* the patient, a ventriloquism that requires constant vigilance. As Amy Shuman advises, such storytelling easily slips from appropriation into exploitation, creating “voyeurs rather than witnesses,” who often “foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding” (5). Shuman proposes “a critique of empathy” to combat such foreclosure, a critique that recognizes the risks of adopting and retelling the stories of others by demanding “obligations between tellers, listeners, and the stories they borrow” (5). In addition to the problem of voyeurism and exploitative appropriation is the danger of overidentification with the victim, an intensification of empathy that puts the witness at risk (LaCapra 212–13). Consequently, witnessing, and telling victims’ stories, is a delicate operation that demands negotiation between too little and too much sympathy, between observation and participation. Narratives of dementia rehearse this balancing act in their representations of victims and caregivers collaborating and exchanging roles. The depictions of dementia included in this chapter show the strain of maintaining ethical empathy and the many risks to self involved in witnessing the transformation of a loved one into an uncanny specter. This distressing vision—the victim is totally other, yet undeniably familiar, known for decades as husband or father, wife or mother—is a witnessing of aging, temporality, difference, that can activate a reluctant, and often disturbing, insight into the uncanniness of selfhood.

## DEMENTIA AND NARRATIVE

### *Barney’s Version* and *Iris*

In many ways, Mordecai Richler’s novel *Barney’s Version* forms a bridge between the previous chapter’s focus on life review and my current attention to narratives of dementia. Written in the first person, *Barney’s Version* is just that, the narrator’s *version* of his life story, a narrative complicated by his worsening Alzheimer’s. Barney Panofsky insists that his version is the authentic one, representing “this shambles that is the true story of my wasted life” (1), in opposition to the slanderous version of Barney Panofsky offered in his enemy Terry McIver’s memoir. Barney regards narrative as a redemptive restoration of truth that will order the chaos of his life, “retrieve some sense” and “unscrambl[e] it” (26). But his narrative is plagued by memory slips that frustrate his efforts at clear, redemptive prose. Barney’s difficulties with memory and language assert themselves from the novel’s beginning:

Hold the phone. I'm stuck. I'm trying to remember the name of the author of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Or was it *The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt*? No, that was written by a fibber. Lillian what's-her-name? Come on. I know it. Like the mayonnaise. Lillian Kraft? No. *Hellman*. *Lillian Hellman*. The name of the author of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* doesn't matter. It's of no importance. But now that it's started I won't sleep tonight. (10–11)

Indeed, as he is falling asleep that night, the sudden absence of vocabulary confronts him again when he finds himself unable to “remember the name of the thing you use to strain spaghetti” (11). The narrative is littered with such self-conscious struggles with memory, the increasing inaccessibility of language. Early on, Barney develops a series of slogans designed to return fugitive vocabulary to its proper place. These phrases come to function as an assertion of self, creating a list of stable, authentic knowledge meant to ward off the frightening and unavoidable changes of later-life dementia:

I began to mutter what is becoming my mantra. Spaghetti is strained with the device I have hanging on my kitchen wall. Mary McCarthy wrote *The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit*. Or *Shirt*. Whichever. I am once a widower and twice divorced. I have three children—Michael, Kate, and the other boy. My favourite dish is braised brisket with horseradish and latkes. Miriam is my heart's desire. I live on Sherbrooke Street West in Montreal. The street number doesn't matter, I'd know the building anywhere. (88)

In his struggle to preserve the details of his identity, Barney mixes the everyday with the intimate, making the function and location of a colander equally important as his feelings for his ex-wife, Miriam, and the names of his children. Barney's compulsive rehearsal of these “life facts” functions as a metaphor of the larger narrative, the anxious narration of details meant to shore up a faltering identity. The two acts of storytelling, micro and macro, point to Barney's narration as a project of preservation, an undertaking that grows increasingly difficult as his illness worsens.

In *Barney's Version*, narrative is self-consciously delivered as a manifestation of self, an authentic riposte to the deceptions of McIver's narrative. Even beyond identity *representation*, Barney's effort to tell “the true story of my wasted life” is an effort at identity *construction*, an effort to produce a “true” self via a “true story” (52). But as the narrative proceeds, the spuriousness of his project becomes evident. Even the singular “version” of

the novel's title suggests the existence of alternatives, alerting readers to the fact that this story is in fact only one subject's telling of a tale, undermining the ostensibly definitive nature of this "true story." Writing of the Borges's story, "The Garden of Forking Paths," Porter Abbott describes the dense narrative web that constantly surrounds the subject, the idea that "from one moment to the next any person inhabits an infinitude of potential stories, any one of which may or may not intersect with any one of the infinitude inhabited by anyone else" ("The Future" 530). Barney's narrative points to the "infinitude" of stories lying outside his personal version. The inclusion of (fictional) textual apparatuses, such as brief excerpts from enemy Terry McIver's journals, newspaper articles, and son Michael Panofsky's footnotes and afterword, situates Barney's narrative as fragmentary, as one text of many. In particular, Michael's footnotes and afterword,<sup>9</sup> ostensibly necessitated by Barney's Alzheimer's-related narrative difficulties, place Barney in a larger narrative web that emphasizes multiplicity: Barney is at once the dynamic, persuasive subject guiding the bulk of the novel, the by turns frustrating, charming, pathetic character in the anecdotal stories provided by his wife and children, and the pathological object alienated by mental disorder.

Unwittingly collaborative, Barney's narrative is in fact completed by others; indeed, the novel's central mystery is solved by Michael, a deduction that finally abolishes the specter of criminality that has darkened Barney's narrative. As a result, the novel poses serious questions regarding the ethics of representation, in particular, the ethics of telling another's stories. The novel presents an interpretative dilemma: the reader can regard Barney as the only legitimate voice of authority, making the novel's appara-

9. Michael Panofsky's rational afterword, which contains and explains the intimate, and often painful, personal narrative supplied by Barney, exposes an imbalance of power that echoes the relations of self and other in other categories of difference, for example, race. In some ways Panofsky's additions recall the function and effect of the emendations white abolitionists often made to slave narratives. Such textual apparatuses sought to legitimize and interpret the slave narrative, often underscoring the pathos of the tale in order to stir the reader to action. In other words, emendations such as the preface to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* by William Lloyd Garrison delimit textual meaning, employing the slave narrative as a tool of agitation: "Reader! are you with the man-stealers in sympathy and purpose, or on the side of their down-trodden victims?" (Garrison 42). Such bracketing apparatuses contain and often overwrite the voice of the subaltern, even as they seek to increase its efficacy. My interpretation of Michael Panofsky's additions in *Barney's Version* also highlights a contradictory effect, arguing that his afterword at once objectifies and redeems the subjectivity it replaces.

tus, son Michael's afterword and footnotes, violations of that authority; or one can regard the two narrators as collaborators, interpreting Michael's narration as an ethical act of continuation that redeems his father, saving him from some of the dissolutions of dementia. Though often laughably pedantic, in the case of the footnotes, or painfully descriptive, in the case of the afterword, Michael's narration alerts the reader to the multiplicity of interpretations, the proliferation of "versions" that Barney's story threatens to deny in its "life review" model. In the novel's final pages, narrated by Michael, comes the realization that Bernard (Boogie) Moscovitch's disappearance, a vanishing that resulted in Barney's trial for murder, was actually caused by an unlikely accident involving a water bomber. Consequently, it is Michael's act of speaking *for*, as well as about, his father that restores Barney's innocence. Michael's appropriation of narrative voice enacts a redemption unavailable to Barney himself. As well, the afterword in some sense "saves" Barney's narrative, at least in generic terms, providing the satisfying resolution demanded of any mystery story. Not only does Michael's narration rescue Barney from the role of murderer, but it also serves to position Barney in a larger narrative web, showing how his stories interconnect with those of others. The afterword necessitated by the dissolution of Barney's storytelling abilities serves to redeem and preserve his narrative and, consequently, his identity.

Though the novel concludes with Barney still alive, he is in what Michael calls a "near-vegetable state" (416). Michael's depiction of debilitated Barney is at odds with the preceding four-hundred-page life review. These adjacent narratives effect a kind of disorienting double vision: Barney appears at once as subject (as blustering storyteller) and object (as debilitated patient). Such double vision destabilizes the discourse of definitive versions, definitive selves, affording the reader a glimpse of identity as change and contradiction, what Abbott calls "the *frisson* of gathering indeterminacies" ("The Future" 530). What *Barney's Version* accomplishes is a revision of the discourse of singularity, revealing any story, any life narrative, as merely *a* version within a larger, shifting narrative network. Michael's narration intimates the existence of nonlinguistic subjectivity, portraying Barney in his disability, unable to speak or write, but wishing to dance. The narration intimates his continuing emotional life, evident in his gestures and expressions, but such reactions are no longer explained. The reader witnesses Barney only from the outside now, glimpsing the otherness that his first-person life review had obscured. Richler's novel reveals how the effects of Alzheimer's disease mark the uncanny instability of human identity, our status as temporal beings.

As Ricoeur and other narrative theorists insist, there is always another version, another story (*Time* 3: 249). But even such multiplicity depends on self-awareness as subjects “recognize themselves in the stories they tell about themselves” (*Time* 3: 247), a process of identification that collapses in the face of dementia, which seriously obstructs, if not destroys, a person’s ability to narrate and recognize. In the following chapter on the double, I deal with problems surrounding visual recognition in more detail, but for the remainder of this chapter, I explore the identity crises that emerge out of the pathological destruction of memory in old age. Richard Eyre’s film *Iris*, along with fiction by Munro and Franzen, demonstrates how later-life dementia lays bare the confounding otherness of the other, a strangeness made all the more bizarre by the traces of familiarity that remain. Dementia forces loved ones to become caregivers and narrative collaborators who must attend to the impossible demands of the uncanny sufferer. The caregiver often confronts the difficulty of narrative communication while at the same time respecting the limits of what he or she continues to offer, typically narrative fragments, incongruous phrases, along with the nonlexical pleasures of embodiment, the pleasures of food and drink, swimming, dancing, or singing. Later-life dementia forces a caregiver to step back from the illusory oneness of love to rediscover the insurmountable twoness of the couple. In his interview with Kearney, Levinas comments on the “platonic ontology” of the romantic tradition, arguing that “[m]an’s relationship with the other is *better* as difference than as unity: sociality is better than fusion. The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, of coinciding into sameness” (22). But the pathological difference of dementia can effectively cancel the value of love’s irreducibility as otherness tips over into pathology. Such a painful glimpse of the loved one’s strangeness can haunt the caregiver, overwhelming him or her with the uncanny experience of witnessing the exposure of absolute otherness, recalling the epigraph’s attention to the uncanny “impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity.” Levinas reflects on the consequences of recognizing otherness and the responsibility it entails: “As soon as I acknowledge that it is ‘I’ who am responsible, I accept that my freedom is anteceded by an obligation to the other. Ethics redefines subjectivity as this heteronomous responsibility, in contrast to autonomous freedom. . . . The other haunts our ontological existence and keeps the psyche awake, in a state of vigilant insomnia” (27–28). The language of haunting is pertinent here, pointing to the destabilizing effect of witnessing the other. The caregivers in these narratives are all haunted in various ways, their stable

identities shaken by new insights into the transformative effects of aging and dementia.<sup>10</sup>

Though lacking the intimacy of *Barney's Version's* first-person narrator, the biographical film *Iris* demonstrates in a different register the unavailability of narrative appropriation in cases of late-life dementia. Based on Iris Murdoch's husband John Bayley's memoirs, *Iris: A Memoir* and *Elegy for Iris*, the film is a portrait of the novelist Iris Murdoch, in particular her late-life struggles with Alzheimer's disease. In many ways, *Iris* is similar to the film *The Notebook*, discussed in the introduction. Both films involve an older couple whose love is strained and strengthened by the older woman's dementia. Like *The Notebook*, *Iris* is structured according to the dualism of young versus old, with images of the old, debilitated Iris set against those of the young, vivacious Iris. The viewer witnesses little of Iris Murdoch's process of aging into old age; indeed, only one brief episode during the film's introductory intercutting between past and present depicts an older Iris still fully in control of memory and language, despite the fact that Bayley's memoir *Elegy for Iris* claims the impairments of Alzheimer's were not obvious until Iris was in her seventies. In *Iris* old age is dramatized primarily as a descent into pathology as Iris succumbs to the debilitating of dementia.

From early on, the film contrasts vital youth with fading age. Viewers' second glimpse of old Iris (Judi Dench)<sup>11</sup> is not of one of "her," at least not in her entirety. A close-up shows her wrinkled hand in the act of writing with a blue pen. The hand jots down a few words before pausing and the camera tilts up to provide a close-up of old Iris's grave profile, an image of intellectual and bodily suspension; her hand paused midsentence is either an instance or a foreshadowing of Alzheimer's impairments. The caging frame of the image echoes the neurological restrictions closing in on old Iris. A sound bridge introduces images of an energetic, happy

10. The narratives I examine repeatedly collapse the two conditions, figuring old age and pathology as indistinguishable demonstrations of painful mortality. For example, in both the Munro stories I discuss, there is never any mention of disease; rather, the debilitating disorientation and forgetfulness experienced by the characters Fiona and Flo appear distinctly linked to their advanced age. Though Alfred's dementia in *The Corrections* is the result of Parkinson's disease, the narration often associates his age and pathology: "The sight of Alfred's suddenly aged face, its disintegration-in-progress, its redness and asymmetries, cut Chip like a bullwhip" (541). Here age is one of Alfred's diseases.

11. In order to avoid confusion I differentiate characters as young or old, a naming I believe echoes the film's binaristic model of identity. Therefore, Kate Winslet's character is "young Iris," Judi Dench's is "old Iris," and so on.

past. The film cuts to a long shot of dynamic young Iris (Kate Winslet) zooming along a country road through lush green forests on her bicycle. “Iris! Iris, wait for me,” young John Bayley (Hugh Bonneville) pleads, his bicycle trailing behind hers. “Just keep tight hold of me and it’ll be all right,” she answers. “You won’t keep still,” he complains. Young Iris’s response evokes the fervent energy of youth: “I can’t keep still,” she calls back to him. In this brief cycling sequence, the wideframing gives Winslet ample room to move, unlike the amputating extreme close-up of old Iris’s hand, her strained expression, framing that fragments the figure and inhibits movement. As the effects of Alzheimer’s quickly become apparent in the film’s first act (the symptoms include the repetition of phrases, sudden bursts into song, a failure to recognize familiars), the *mise-en-scène* further directs the viewer’s interpretation of the present, and by implication, old age. The vibrant colors and warm, soft light of young Iris’s world contrast sharply with the increasingly dull hues and dim dusty light of old Iris’s greatly circumscribed and cluttered spaces, a visual differentiation that continues throughout the film. Indeed, locations, such as the English seaside, are signaled as either past or present by their lighting. Here age appears as a literal dimming that leaves the protagonist shuffling through disordered, shadowy spaces.

In this differentiation the editing and *mise-en-scène* reinforce cultural scripts of aging by dividing the lifecourse into the diametrically opposed categories of young and old,<sup>12</sup> a practice of segmentation that signals what Woodward labels our “curious arithmetical relation to time. In this sense, the unconscious could be said to be able to count only up to two” (*Discontents* 184–85). But aging into old age often erodes this binarism, with uncanny results. The changes of age may involve an intrusion of time’s otherness, a glimpse of the nonarithmetical that undermines categorization. Though *Iris* polarizes human life into categories of old and young, it also evokes continuity, a blurring of boundaries that exposes age as uncannily fluid and nonlinear. Furthermore, the film simultaneously sympathizes with the pathos of Iris’s illness, elegizing the gradual erasure of her memory and abilities, and actually contributes to such erasure, substituting one version for many: the undoubtedly abundant narratives that constitute Iris the writer, Iris the mature, accomplished woman, Iris the public intellectual, are overwritten with narratives of illness and loss. As such, the film threatens to transform Iris Murdoch into a mascot for dementia.<sup>13</sup>

12. This temporal binarism mimics the organization of Bayley’s *Elegy for Iris*, which is split into two sections, titled “Then” and “Now.”

13. The paratextual apparatus included on the DVD attests to this mascot status.

In *Iris* the disruption of temporal polarization (the dividing of Iris into young and old) suggests an experience of nonarithmetical time. The film's editing brings temporal spaces together, occasionally allowing past and present, young and old to occupy the same frame, or at least the same narrative sequence. The film uses connective editing techniques, particularly eyeline matches and a concluding match on action,<sup>14</sup> to intermingle past and present, thereby admitting the familiarity so lacking in the *mise-en-scène's* radical differentiation between the warm past and chilly present. The fluidity suggested by the editing prevents young Iris and young John from being entirely estranged from old Iris and old John, depicting a continuity that encourages the viewer to recognize these characters as the same, but different, persons, demonstrating how the familiar introduced into the strange can provoke the uncanny. The film clouds and complicates the discrete categories of young and old by attending to continuity, suggesting the constancy of aging that makes subjects always other than themselves, endlessly different, yet the same. In *Iris*, editorial choices produce ripples in the dyad of "then" and "now."

Indeed, the film uses water imagery to underscore the fluid interpenetration of temporal spaces. The title credits appear over an underwater sequence that is hazy, yet gentle, the cloudy river water shot through with wavering beams of sunshine. Underwater plants brush past the camera's lens as it moves forward through the murky water. The extradiegetic music of pulsing strings is hushed yet expectant. A shadowy shape enters the corner of the frame accompanied by a celebratory shimmer of cymbals. A naked young Iris swims by the camera, and the title appears transposed over the nymphlike image. Young John enters the frame and moves toward her; they join hands and move toward the surface in a kiss. The film cuts to more underwater traveling shots of undulating plants. A near-invisible dissolve allows old Iris to enter the watery frame, her appearance also accompanied by cymbals, though this time their celebration is muted. Like young

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The DVD special features all revolve around the film's depiction of Alzheimer's and the Alzheimer's Association's wholehearted support, some would say appropriation, of the film: there is a filmed award ceremony in which the association honors the film, and a chilling plea from its spokesperson, David Hyde Pierce, that appeals to its American audience with a bottom-line argument: "the disease costs our country over a hundred billion dollars a year and without a research breakthrough the Alzheimer's epidemic alone will cost enough to bankrupt Medicare." Iris Murdoch the philosopher, the novelist, the teacher, has become a fundraising vehicle.

14. The match on action is "a continuity cut which splices two different views of the same action together at the same moment in the movement, making it seem to continue uninterrupted" (Bordwell and Thompson 480).

Iris, old Iris wears an expression of obvious pleasure. Old John joins old Iris, who smiles and says a few words, which are transformed into bubbles. John answers her with a similarly garbled remark. They join hands and move away from the camera up toward the water's surface. In this brief introductory sequence the watery space provides the opportunity for the softening of boundaries, both literally in the nearly invisible dissolves between shots, and figuratively in the suggestive cohabitation of various selves. The suggestion of continuity provided by the parallel experiences and actions of the two couples swimming separately and then together provides a template for much of the film. The fluidity of the scene, both literal and figurative, dissolves illusions of fixity, suggestively representing the slipperiness of aging, of time.

Later editorial incorporations of multiple temporalities in a single visual space allow for even more poignant doublings of continuity and change. Eyeline matches allow for double vision in which John sees Iris, and she returns his gaze as both young and old, a further cohabitation of the tenses that at once stresses continuity and makes plain the painful changes of age. In its simultaneous depiction of young and old, such editing expresses narrative identity and evokes the uncanniness of an older subject so constant and familiar, and yet so distressingly altered and strange.<sup>15</sup> However, the implications for time and aging in *Iris* remain problematic. The disruption of temporal categories can function at once as consolation and as a disturbing reminder of time's transformative effects. Though I read the editorial combination of tenses as a stripping away of the reductive illusion of age segmentation, the overemphasis on *similarity* between different selves risks a denial of difference. Certainly maintaining connections between "different but not incomparable selves" is difficult, particularly, one might add, when those selves are the time-altered version of a single person, and the desire to slip into totalizing models of sameness and difference may be tempting. *Iris* seems to oscillate between such categories, achieving brief moments of suspension that expose uncanny identity. The emphasis on temporal cohabitation threatens to reify identity-consistency over time, evoking models of core selfhood that strengthen the romantic pathos of Iris and John's eternal love.<sup>16</sup> But I believe the consolatory potential of

15. This cohabitation is a far cry from the distinct categories and narratives maintained in *The Notebook*. In *Iris* there is an obvious attempt to create visual similarities between the older and younger actors, whereas Gena Rowlands and Rachel McAdams of *The Notebook* bear no resemblance to one another; indeed it might take viewers some time to realize that they are both playing the same character.

16. Such a reading is reinforced by the snippets of old Iris lecturing on love and

sameness is undercut by the undeniability of change, which can make strict segmentation so appealing in the first place. The revelation of continuity, of some sameness, destroys what might be a more palatable illusion: that these two (younger and older Iris) are indeed entirely different people. In *Iris* the visualization of temporal continuity (as opposed to a discrete past and present) is what makes (pathological) old age so disturbing. In *The Notebook*, narrative connects past and present, functioning simultaneously as bridge and border that prevents infiltration, allowing minimal contact between distinct temporal selves. *Iris* perforates such a boundary, enabling temporal incursions that complicate the segmentation of age identities.

The film's biographical claims further complicate a reading of age and identity. *Iris* raises important questions regarding the telling of other person's stories, ethical concerns that I take up in the following discussion of fiction by Alice Munro and Jonathan Franzen. As with all biographies of deceased subjects, the telling of other people's stories places the biographer in a position of ethical responsibility.<sup>17</sup> Iris Murdoch's husband, John Bayley, functions as both witness and speaker for his disabled wife, providing testimony that Murdoch can no longer provide. The endurance of the Iris-John bond is central to the film, and, perhaps inevitably, it is as much John Bayley's story as it is Iris Murdoch's. The circumstances of Alzheimer's inhibit self-representation, and as a result the audience is given Murdoch *through* Bayley: the camera most often shares his point of view as an observer of Iris. Or, one could say, "It is Murdoch's story. But we have to let Bayley tell it." However, moments of continuity in the film infringe on the absolute alterity of dementia, preventing Murdoch from becoming a pathological object.

Though *Iris* relies on sentiment and nostalgia, often conveyed through romantic clichés, it maintains a complexity and obscurity absent from *The Notebook*, a film that concludes with an image of union, the simultaneous peaceful deaths of the long-devoted husband and wife. *Iris* concludes with images of solitude. In the end, the camera remains omniscient, the

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goodness, which are intercut with images suggesting the early stages of her Alzheimer's. It is notable that this lecture is one of the only moments in which viewers see and hear a lucid old Iris. Accordingly, love appears as the only consistent aspect of Iris, the lecture forming a bridge between healthy youth and afflicted old age. Love, *Iris* suggests, is not dependent on language alone, and can persist even as speech and memory fade away.

17. As Anthony Kerby explains, "[t]elling a person's story tends invariably to plot the type of moral agent he or she is or was" (56). As well, biography demands a degree of legibility and coherence; biographers must "find shape and meaning within the apparently random circumstances of a life" (Holmes 16–17). Certainly a condition such as dementia complicates and reinforces such demands.

responsibility of witnessing transferred from John to the audience. The final image of Iris before her death shows her, alone in the hallway of the nursing home, dancing in the sunlight that streams through the many windows. In this final scene the camera feigns invisibility and old Iris appears unmediated and unprotected by her husband, making spectators the only witnesses to this private, impenetrable moment. This attention to nonlinguistic expression continues into the following scenes, in which we see John sadly sorting through his wife's clothes. The bright light of the previous scene is gone and the image is once again muted and dusty. The dimming effect of the disease has been visually transferred to John, who is caught in a shadowy grief. Alone, distraught, he now bears the burden of his wife's dementia; in the end it is John's suffering we witness. As John hugs her slip to his face, a rack focus—a shift in focus from one plane to another—brings the viewer's attention to a collection of stones, leaves, and dried algae on his wife's pillow. A stone slips off the pillow, and a match on action allows the stone to fall from the pillow into what one assumes is the same river that opened the film. The stone replaces the vibrant, swimming Iris of the film's opening, its lonely descent reflecting the final isolation enacted by late-life dementia. After Iris's death there can be no more collaboration, and her caregiver, her collaborator, her witness, is left stranded. The final scene enacts the transferal of ethical responsibility: viewers are now the only witnesses, left with a wordless visual image. The stone suggests incomprehensibility, otherness, and a degree of narrative opacity that denies straightforward teleology and closure. Resting on the riverbed the stone is still, but easily set into motion by an animal, a rough wind, a swimmer. This final emphasis on the material, the unpredictable, the distinctly inhuman, encourages viewers to consider the ending as partial. The stone's steadfast presence in contrast to Iris's absence once again points to the intermingling of continuity and constant change that is the foundation of narrative identity.

## COLLABORATION AND CARE

### Munro's Stories and *The Corrections*

Alice Munro, the prolific short story writer now in her seventies, has a writing career spanning five decades. Her early works, particularly the connected short story collections *The Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), have garnered much critical attention as feminist explorations of identity that provocatively explore

the politics of gender and art. Critics have stressed her commitment to the everyday lives of women, her unflinching investigations into the by turns suffocating and satisfying world of the domestic. These early stories often engage with the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, dramatizing the difficulties female characters encounter in aspiring to such a masculine model of growth and mature independence.<sup>18</sup> But Munro has also often turned her attention to older subjects, producing stories (particularly in her recent collections) that follow characters through maturity, into middle age and later life. Yet critical attention continues to rest on Munro's treatment of youth and young adulthood despite her recent attention to aging.<sup>19</sup>

Many of Munro's recent stories, such as "Powers," "Silence," and "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," focus on characters confronting the changes of aging into old age. In Munro's 2001 short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" (*Hateship*), recently made popular by Sarah Polley's film adaptation, *Away From Her*,<sup>20</sup> the onset of dementia disrupts the relationship of an older couple, Fiona and Grant. Fiona is institutionalized near the beginning of the story, and her subjectivity remains unavailable as the narrative oscillates between present and past, between Grant's struggle to comprehend Fiona's altered identity and his ignorance of her experience of their shared past. Through these temporal shifts the reader learns that Grant is a retired professor of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic literature, that he had several rather tempestuous affairs with students, and that the couple lived in Fiona's parents' house, where they led intellectual, reclusive lives. Readers learn little of Fiona herself in the depictions of the past, which are mostly focalized through Grant. Grant's knowledge of his wife is significantly limited; he has tended to think of Fiona as delightfully foreign, as a dynamic but mysterious being. The scenes from the past expose how Grant has relied on Fiona's persistent otherness to justify his

18. This is particularly the case in *Lives of Girls and Women*, in which the protagonist Del observes and eventually encounters the trying, often self-negating demands of womanhood. This collection has proved to be a critical favorite, continuing to appear on many university syllabi.

19. For example, a search of the Modern Language Association database produces twenty-five citations on *Lives of Girls and Women* and eleven dealing with childhood, whereas only two sources appear to deal explicitly with aging, old age, or maturity in Munro's work.

20. Polley's film is interesting for its rearrangement of the story's ethical potential. By muting Grant's sexism and objectification of women, which are so clearly displayed in Munro's story, the film consigns much of the ambiguity and moral conflict to the background. The film is a powerful love story, but many of the insights into identity, which are so important to the story, are absent.

betrayals, regarding her as a delightfully opaque object, denying her subjectivity in order to indulge his own transgressive desires. Grant discards any possibility of obligation to this other, but Fiona's dementia forces a new engagement with responsibility.

According to Naomi Morgenstern, revelations of responsibility are characteristic of Munro's stories, which frequently "address the question of why it is that the ethical insight—that the other exists beyond the self—needs to be repeated" (72). But this ethical insight raises a number of problems, as Morgenstern makes clear in a series of questions: "How can one reach out to the other without doing violence to their otherness in the very attempt to fold them into the self's understanding? How can an encounter with alterity not do violence to the encountering subject . . . ?" (71). Munro's stories repeatedly depict characters teetering along such an ethical high wire, often exposing the impossibility of maintaining such a balancing act. Morgenstern deftly elucidates the ethical import of various Munro stories, in particular, how distinctly gendered ethical dilemmas encourage a reconsideration of "femininity" (73). Stories such as "Post and Beam," "Meneseteung," and "My Mother's Dream" involve female protagonists encountering a critical but largely impossible responsibility for other women. In "Bear," the ethical crisis is no longer one experienced between two women, but rather involves a husband responding to his dementia-afflicted wife, an unexpected call to awareness and responsibility at odds with the husband's history of carelessness and infidelity. Grant is a past lacking any evidence of ethical insight or empathetic response. It is only Fiona's dementia, which exaggerates unfamiliarity to a staggering degree, that forces Grant to finally confront alterity, both the otherness of other people and the otherness of self.

Fiona's dementia asserts itself in a great disordering—of linear chronology, of linguistic codes, of navigational cues. Dementia caused by Alzheimer's disease involves a selective deterioration of the brain that allows for some recognizable consistency of identity in the midst of alarming strangeness. The selectivity of dementia can actually inhibit a caregiver's efforts to come to terms with the alterations of the disease, as moments of familiarity, the sudden appearance of an identity assumed lost, can undermine any attempts to adjust to the strange newness of the condition. In Munro's story, Fiona's familiarity causes Grant to doubt their choice to move her into a care facility. As she prepares to leave the house, Grant reflects that, at age seventy and suffering from dementia, she is remarkably unchanged: "*She looked just like herself on this day*" (276, original emphasis). The grammar of Grant's rumination is telling; he produces an analogy that

compares the thing, in this case, Fiona, to itself, producing a closed circuit of comparison that is impossible to contradict. The circular relation between the two pronouns, “she,” and “herself,” reflects Fiona’s inscrutability; with no outside basis for comparison she is, of course, always successfully “herself.” This invulnerable model of identity assessment is key to Grant’s perception of Fiona, and to the relationship that results from such perception. The inclusion of multiple incidents remembered from Grant’s past attests to his ongoing assessment of Fiona as invariably and fetchingly opaque. The scene involving Fiona’s move to Meadowlake follows directly after a description of their betrothal, in which Grant accepts Fiona’s spontaneous proposal because “[h]e wanted never to be away from her. She had the spark of life” (275). Bewitched by her vitality, Grant accepts her subjectivity as entirely mysterious, often quaintly so.

His interpretation of Fiona, or more precisely his acceptance of her very *un*interpretability, provokes Grant to perceive her early signs of dementia, what the medical community term “mild cognitive impairments,” as signs of her enduring eccentricity. When Grant notices a proliferation of yellow notes stuck on cupboards and drawers, he sees an extension of her “mystifying and touching” tendency to write all sorts of things down, from book titles and errands to her domestic schedule (276). In fact, as Grant quickly learns, the yellow notes are Fiona’s effort to attach signs to their referents; to forestall the disintegration of all connections between words and the everyday world around her, she must literally paste words onto objects. The labeling triggers Grant to recall “a story about the German soldiers on border patrol in Czechoslovakia during the war. Some Czech had told him that each of the patrol dogs wore a sign that said *Hund*. Why? Said the Czechs, and the Germans said, Because that is a *hund*” (276). The story groups Fiona’s pathological symptoms with quirky, *foreign* behavior, the bizarre traditions of strangers. Fiona has not so much *become* a stranger as been *revealed* as one, the exaggerated idiosyncratic actions distinguishing her as a foreigner.<sup>21</sup>

21. The story’s attention to signification depicts language as a disorienting facade, one both imposed (the sticky notes must be attached to their referents; the *Hund* must literally wear his linguistic identity) and indisputable; the circle of signification reveals that the *Hund* is a *Hund* and Fiona is herself. But the narrator insists she looked *like* herself, employing the language of seeming, and untrustworthy appearances. The language of deceit recurs throughout the story, and Coral Ann Howells points out the numerous mentions of “tricks” and “disguises” (*Contemporary* 58, 60). An attention to jokes and tricks recurs throughout Munro’s fiction, a recurrence critics have associated with her larger preoccupation with the inadequacy and duplicity of language, her “fascination with the very limits of representation, especially in language” (Heble 4).

After an imposed three-month separation from Fiona, meant to allow her to adjust to her new environment, Grant experiences a new excitement as he prepares to visit Meadowlake: “He was full of solemn tingling, as in the old days on the morning of his first planned meeting with a new woman. . . . There was an expectation of discovery, almost a spiritual expansion. Also timidity, humility, alarm” (287). Fiona has been transformed into the “other woman,” other than his wife, other than herself. The situation provokes a novel gesture: Grant buys her flowers, though “[h]e had never presented flowers to Fiona before. Or to anyone else” (287). Grant himself becomes altered by Fiona’s condition, a diffusion of difference that triggers self-consciousness and alienation. He experiences himself as a character “in a cartoon” (287), engaging in emotions and behavior other than his own. Upon arrival at Meadowlake, he finds Fiona distinctly familiar yet strange: “He could not throw his arms around her. Something about her voice and smile, familiar as they were, something about the way she seemed to be guarding the players and even the coffee woman from him—as well as him from their displeasure—made that not possible” (289). The reference to Fiona’s protective air suggests a community unavailable to Grant, an exclusion that becomes increasingly obvious as the story continues. In typical Munro fashion there is a reversal that finds Grant occupying the role of stranger as a result of Fiona’s disease; in recognizing her otherness Grant comes to glimpse his own strangeness. This insight has great ethical potential if the witness can move toward the kind of difficult, respectful response that Morgenstern elaborates, but there is also risk involved as the witness’s selfhood is strained by increased awareness of his or her own instability, an awakening to the universal strangeness described in Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves*, her assertion that otherness lurks within every subject. No longer permitted opportunities to participate in Fiona’s life, Grant is confined to the position of

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Often Munro’s stories disrupt the transparency of language, calling into question the very act of representation. As a result her stories often prompt a degree of self-reflexivity in their readers that makes us aware of our own role as witnesses. As Magdalene Redekop explains, “The pleasure of reading Alice Munro is, in the final analysis, that we catch ourselves in the act of looking” (3). This positioning of readers as self-conscious witnesses raises further questions regarding ethical insight, as readers become increasingly aware of the “otherness of others” and the responsibility such awareness entails. One quickly realizes that any desires to determine true identities, motives, and allegiances are in vain, inevitably frustrated by a narrative of reversals and tricks. This narrative and linguistic precariousness complements the problems of identity and understanding that the story dramatizes. This is a story of the *uncanny* as a term of reversal, of *unraveling*, of *unsteady*ing, *unsettling*.

observer, and he spends much of his time at Meadowlake tagging along with his wife, a tolerated “nuisance” (291). Understandably, this enforced role of outsider seriously alters his relationship with his wife and arguably introduces Grant to a new ethical awareness. Dementia brings alterity to the fore, and Grant is forced to confront a mysteriousness that is no longer quaint and far from comforting.

In the past Fiona had been a useful other, one that reinforced Grant’s own selfhood. The disappearance of this stabilizing, benign other whose subjectivity Grant could easily efface now disrupts Grant’s own selfhood. When Kristy, a staff member at Meadowlake, asks him whether he is “glad to see her participating and everything,” Grant cannot respond directly, but rather answers with reference to himself: “Does she even know who I am?” (290). In a sense, Grant’s question is a predictable response to Kristy, since he is accustomed to locating himself via Fiona. Much of what follows in the story involves Grant’s difficult observations of Fiona outside of any relation to himself. Unable to recognize Grant as her husband, Fiona continues to exist as Fiona, as other, forcing Grant to glimpse his own insignificance. Early in the story, Grant dreams of one of his previous infidelities, a dream that provides readers with some sense of his perception of Fiona and their past relationship. In the dream Grant receives an accusatory letter from the roommate of one of his student lovers: “Its style was sanctimonious and hostile, threatening in a whining way—he put the writer down as a latent lesbian. The girl herself was someone he had parted from decently, and it seemed unlikely that she would want to make a fuss, let alone try to kill herself, which was what the letter was apparently, elaborately, trying to tell him” (283). As the dream continues Grant finds himself in a lecture hall filled with “cold-eyed young women in black robes” who sit in the “last, highest row” and “never [take] their bitter stares off him” (284). Fiona appears in the lecture hall as well, her expression and positioning (“in the first row”) a direct contrast to the “flock” of menacing women. Her response to the threatening letter is dismissive: “Oh, phooey. . . . Girls that age are always going around talking about how they’ll kill themselves,” a reaction that, though supportive, seems flimsy and unaware of the “black ring [that] was thickening, drawing in, all around his windpipe, all around the top of the room” (284). In this dream, Fiona’s comments express the version of identity Grant has constructed for her; she is supportive and strange, removed from the shifting public morals and opinions that are encircling him.

Fiona’s condition initiates an ironic reversal; as reluctant witness Grant comes to occupy the territory he had always reserved for others, in

particular for women, whom he has typically desired for their intoxicating, bewildering strangeness. Meadowlake's ability to redefine normality thrusts Grant into exile, as he can witness Fiona and her friends only from a distance. But normality depends on a majority's ability to exclude others, and an influx of the young and able-bodied on Meadowlake's visiting day reverses the ordinariness of the institutionalized: "And now surrounded by a variety of outsiders these insiders did not look like such regular people after all. Female chins might have had their bristles shaved to the roots and bad eyes might be hidden by patches or dark lenses, inappropriate utterances might be controlled by medication, but some glaze remained, a haunted rigidity—as if people were content to become memories of themselves, final photographs" (296). Visitors dissolve the community and normality of the "insiders" by dragging along with them the restrictive expectations that disallow the institutionalized to betray their altered state. Newness, strangeness, must be contained and hidden, resulting in haunted subjects, people fixed by the oppressive weight of the past. The passage includes the language of traces, of unsettling remainders that infiltrate the reassuring facades. The references to haunting, memories, and photographs speak to the permeation of tenses, the failure of attempts to segment and isolate past and present selves. Despite efforts to impose fixity and conceal the effects of temporal identity, "some glaze remained." The introduction of "outsiders" into the institution enforces a youth-based version of normality that dissolves the ordinariness of the insiders' new, "perverse" selves that leave unsettling traces on the performed selves manufactured for the visitors' benefit. As a result, these alterations of time haunt the imposed identity of a remembered self. The "insiders" become memories, photographs, fixed signs of themselves, simulacra that recall the early description of Fiona as looking "just like herself." In effect, the debilitations of old age transform subjects into imitations of themselves, often highly accurate copies, but copies nonetheless. Thus, the not-yet-old, or more specifically, the not-yet-afflicted-by-age, deny the otherness of human temporality by refusing to accept the cohabitation of continuity and change. By opting for one or the other, they deny the more unsettling possibility of uncanny aging, of subjects, of selves, at once the same and different, familiar and strange. In forcing the Meadowlake residents to function as memories and photographs, their visitors deny the otherness of the other.

As a result of his long periods of observation, Grant comes to occupy a kind of liminal space, removed from both sides of the visitor-resident divide. He is privy to various performances in his role as witness, and this

alternate position facilitates a new ethical awareness in Grant. An ambiguously focalized passage describing the lives of the Meadowlake residents depicts such new insight:

People here—even the ones who did not participate in any activities but sat around watching the doors or looking out the windows—were living a busy life in their heads (not to mention the life of their bodies, the portentous shifts in their bowels, the stabs and twinges everywhere along the line), and that was a life that in most cases could not very well be described or alluded to in front of visitors. All they could do was wheel or somehow propel themselves and hope to come up with something that could be displayed or talked about. (297)

Here the reader can glimpse the disconcerting abjection of old age. If one does indeed detect something of Grant's perspective here, then it is a perspective in transformation, showing an emerging willingness to acknowledge the incomprehensible, but nonetheless existent, subjectivity of others.

At Meadowlake, Fiona forms a close bond with another resident, Aubrey, an intimacy that excludes her husband. Grant continues to visit his wife, but remains somewhat of an outsider; Fiona treats him "as some persistent visitor who took a special interest in her. Or perhaps even as a nuisance who must be prevented, according to her old rules of courtesy, from realizing that he was one" (291–92). So committed is Fiona to this new relationship that when Aubrey is taken home by his own wife, she becomes despondent, eating little, barely moving, only "weeping weakly, on a bench by the wall" (306). In an effort to save Fiona from being moved to the second floor where she can get long-term bedcare, a floor reserved for "the people who . . . had really lost it" (298), Grant makes a visit to Aubrey and his wife, Marian, asking that Aubrey be allowed to return to Meadowlake, if only as a visitor. After some subtle negotiations and an implied offer of companionship, Aubrey is allowed to return. But Fiona's allegiances have shifted once more and she rejects Aubrey as a stranger, rejoicing instead at Grant's return:

"I'm happy to see you," she said, and pulled his earlobes.

"You could have just driven away," she said. "Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken."

He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. He said, Not a chance. (322)

Even this scene of possible reconciliation bears the traces of unsettling strangeness. Though Fiona expresses a familiarity through her ambiguous manipulation of language, Grant is aware of unmistakable alteration, which his focalization associates with decay: “Her skin or her breath gave off a faint new smell, a smell that seemed to him like that of the stems of cut flowers left too long in their water” (321). The unpleasant *new* odor of decomposition coexists with the pleasant familiarity of her “sweetly shaped skull” (322). Though she “retrieve[s], with an effort, some bantering grace” (322), her embrace alerts Grant to the undeniable changes of age. These final lines remain highly enigmatic, as Coral Ann Howells makes clear in her analysis of the collection as a whole. She regards Grant’s “Not a chance” as “an echo of his old duplicitous reassurances,” emphasizing the “indeterminacy” of the closing scene (77). She sees this indeterminacy as part of the larger “promise of unpredictability” at work in the collection as a whole, which exposes the difficulty in distinguishing reality from simulacrum (77). But while Howells sees the mysteriousness of liminal spaces between the real and the imagined, I see an obscurity in this story more directly related to the inscrutability of temporality and identity. It is certainly the case that Grant’s sincerity is indeterminable, that it is impossible to know whether the scene is indeed a “real encounter between husband and wife,” whether there is “genuine emotional warmth on Fiona’s part or just in Grant’s imagination” (77). But I believe there is a larger, and perhaps more frightening, indeterminacy at work here.

In “Bear,” later life compels a rereading of life stories that exposes the flexibility of interpretation, and consequently, of identity. Fiona’s dementia demands not only rereading, but also a readjustment of expectations and allegiances, a new engagement with ethical responsibility. The process of aging into old age, complicated by Fiona’s dementia, introduces Grant to a new awareness of responsibility that moves him to moments of ethical empathy in which he glimpses both his own strangeness, and the familiarity of the other. Between absolute alterity and the violent containment of the “other’s otherness with an economy of the same” (Morgenstern 72), diacritical hermeneutics depends on a fragile balancing of respect and recognition that introduces us to our own uncanniness, an acknowledgment of “ourselves-as-others.” Fiona’s dementia introduces Grant to a new model of relating that provides the potential for ethical witnessing and interpretation, for empathy and the appreciation of another’s needs. Excluded from participation, Grant is forced to assume a role he has refused throughout his life, that of the witness whose primary job is to listen and observe. This new position of witness leads Grant toward ethical insight, toward a recognition of and respect for Fiona’s otherness that prompts an uncharac-

teristic act of selflessness—the return of Aubrey to Meadowlake—in which he puts the other’s needs before his own.

Some of Munro’s earlier work also shows a preoccupation with ethical crises prompted by aging, particularly aging into old age complicated by illness. *Who Do You Think You Are?* is a collection of connected short stories that follow protagonist Rose through her childhood in a small, poor town; her subsequent move to a nearby city; her lucrative but unhappy marriage to the son of a wealthy department store baron; and her subsequent divorce. The two final stories depict Rose in her maturity returning to sites of her youth. In particular, the story “Spelling” concerns Rose in her middle age (her marriage is over; her children are grown; her career is established, if not always flourishing) and her new responsibility for her aged and ailing stepmother, Flo. When Rose returns to her childhood home she realizes the severity of Flo’s disability: the house is jumbled and dirty and Flo has difficulty recognizing Rose as her stepdaughter. As well, Flo has developed some bizarre habits (the table is always set; she drinks maple syrup from the bottle). Rose’s self-serving fantasies of devoted caregiving quickly dissolve as Flo’s strangeness triggers the recollection of past narratives of frustration and disappointment, revealing Flo’s difficult behavior in old age as a disturbing evolution of her past transgressions. Flo in the present is often obstinate and demanding to a pathological degree; Flo in the past was willful, stubborn, and racist. As with Fiona, the afflicted other in “Bear,” Flo’s delusional old age modifies a longstanding strangeness. These stories suggest dementia as a pathological amplification of pre-existing otherness, an exaggeration that forces loved ones to acknowledge such otherness and adapt to its demands. In these two stories, much of the pathos of dementia comes from the flashes of connection and understanding that seem to momentarily dispel dementia’s murky incomprehensibility. The stories represent distressing, even frightful alterity; but they also depict the potential for a kind of pleasurable collaboration. Dementia makes such moments entirely unpredictable, but their existence thwarts the urge to consign the afflicted person to the realm of the monstrous other. Familiarity can return suddenly, forcefully, when one least expects it, an uncanny return of selfhood where the unafflicted were tempted to assume none existed any longer.

Rose first confronts the problem of responding to seemingly absolute otherness when she visits the County Home in preparation for Flo’s institutionalization. There she meets a woman whom age has transformed into

a kind of automated object, an encounter that leads to a revelation similar to that experienced by Grant in “Bear,” a budding awe at the incomprehensible, yet undeniable, personhood of those suffering the severe debilitations of old age and illness: “Taking in oxygen, giving out carbon dioxide, they continued to participate in the life of the world” (“Spelling” 226–27). Rose’s visit to the County Home forces her to consider the otherness of persons seriously debilitated by aging, those who are unable to participate in the everyday world of language and movement. She confronts head-on the limits of her understanding and imagination and the difficulty of responding ethically to a radically altered subjectivity. The story’s title refers to the only verbal communication still available to the woman Rose meets at the County Home, a communication that becomes an “expression of her humanity” (Redekop 140). “Crouched in her crib, diapered, dark as a nut, with three tufts of hair,” the nameless old woman the nurse calls “Aunty” will spell out any word she hears (Munro 227). Infantilized and abject, “the old woman” continues to exist, to “participate in the life of the world,” though hers is an incomprehensible existence spent “meandering through that emptiness or confusion that nobody on this side can do more than guess at” (228). Rose tries to imagine such an unusual relationship with language, how words might have a kind of foreign vitality to them, making each one seem “alive as a new animal,” coming together to form “[a] parade of private visitors” (228). But this is only one of a list of possible subjectivities Rose imagines. Once again, Munro’s fiction suggests that language is not a simple container for meaning, but a demonstration of the impossibility of pure communication, what Heble identifies as Munro’s “fascination with the very limits of representation” (4). Words signify in very different ways for the various speakers and listeners, writers and readers. Language in “Spelling” is transformed from a transparent medium to an opaque material; it no longer contains meaning, but exists on its own terms, without reference to linguistic structures of meaning. The story’s title—“Spelling”—points to the central importance of the scene and its exploration of the difficulties involved in interpreting personhood and subjectivity, the tendency to associate identity with vivacious youth. Rose’s witnessing of the spelling woman initiates an insight into otherness that makes possible a new kind of respect and communication that will reappear in the story’s concluding scene.

The majority of the story shows Rose and Flo at odds, with very little suggestion of understanding or collaboration between the two women. They appear distant, almost strangers, each vaguely ashamed of the other. The story’s final pages involve a sequence of scenes depicting numerous

failures of communication between Rose and Flo, but culminating in a scene in which the difficulties and demands of aging make possible a new kind of understanding, one able to incorporate miscommunication. The earlier depictions of frustrated communication show the two women at loggerheads, each cocooned in her own resentful superiority. In one episode the appearance of Rose's bared breast in a televised theatre performance inspires Flo to write a letter of admonishment. The letter does the opposite of communicating, becoming instead a testament to the pair's inability to comprehend one another. Far from bridging the gap between them, the letter draws attention to its expanse, giving Rose a "fresh and overwhelming realization" of that "gulf" (231). Flo's letter becomes a kind of party trick for Rose, who reads it aloud to her friends "for comic effect," a betrayal that transforms a supposed intimate—Rose's stepmother—into a figure of public mockery (230). Here the comedy works in only one direction: Flo is the unaware, and one would assume unwilling, butt of the joke, while Rose relishes the humor. This is not comedic collaboration. Flo's sincere admonishment is so bewildering to Rose that it can be understood only as absurdity, the nonsensically outdated prudishness of an old woman from a small town: "These reproaches of Flo's made as much sense as a protest about raising umbrellas, a warning against eating raisins" (231). This narrative of Flo's indignation is followed by one in which the shaming is reversed, with Flo committing the humiliating offense. When Rose invites Flo to an award reception where she will be honored, Flo's racist language exposes her small-town naïveté. "Look at the Nigger!" Flo cries upon glimpsing another award recipient (231): "Her tone was one of simple, gratified astonishment, as if she had been peering down the Grand Canyon or seen oranges growing on a tree" (231–32). The similes construct Flo's outburst as a reaction to something strange and remarkable, and it is this very reaction that ironically exposes Flo herself as exactly that. To the other ceremony attendees, the "bearded and beaded, the unisexual and the unashamedly un-Anglo-Saxon" (232), Flo is something strange, though perhaps more repellent than remarkable.

It is only within the altered circumstances of aging and dementia that the possibility of collaboration and understanding arises as Rose gains new ethical insight, as suggested in her reaction to the old spelling woman. The story's final scene demonstrates how a new communicative potential grows out of a shared appreciation of absurdity. It is Munro's characteristic use of humor that most powerfully confirms the prevailing humanity of the delusional other, providing both characters and readers with a glimpse of a largely incomprehensible, but undeniable, subjectivity that frustrates

the simple objectification of difference. When Rose brings one of Flo's old wigs to the County Home where Flo now lives, Flo mistakes the wig for a dead gray squirrel. Rose explains that the hairy thing is, in fact, a wig and the two begin to laugh. Rose looks at the wig and considers that it "did look like a dead cat or squirrel, even though she had washed and brushed it; it was a disturbing-looking object." Flo exclaims, "I thought what is she doing bringing me a dead squirrel! If I put it on somebody'd be sure to take a shot at me." Rose responds by sticking it on her own head to "continue the comedy, and Flo laughed so that she rocked back and forth in her crib" (232). The episode depicts a shared pleasure in slapstick, portraying the communicative potential of the absurd. Rose not only humors Flo's delusions by behaving according to the peculiar expectations of dementia but also delights her with a comedic display that facilitates a shared pleasure previously unavailable to stepmother and stepdaughter. Rose and Flo enjoy a moment of comical absurdity, finding some respite, even comfort, in shared silliness. Rose's increasing openness to the incomprehensibility of the other produces a new experience of *collaborative* humor distinctly kinder than her previous mocking comedy. The unexpected joke suggests that an ethical response may come as the result of an overturning of rational meaning. Understanding transpires in moments of nonsense and absurdity, such as "Aunty's" spelling or Rose's slapstick. These moments involve an alternative form of dialogue, one that maintains a productive space between self and other; the "gulf" between Rose and Flo remains, but they can hear one another's cries from the other side. In "Spelling," the alterations of aging compel Rose's consideration of otherness, an otherness she eventually struggles to acknowledge and even respect.

The moment of comedy is quickly followed by Flo's delusional references to her gallstones and dead husband:

When she got her breath Flo said, "What am I doing with these damn sides up on my bed? Are you and Brian behaving yourselves? Don't fight, it gets on your father's nerves. Do you know how many gallstones they took out of me? Fifteen! One as big as a pullet's egg. I got them somewhere. I'm going to take them home." She pulled at the sheets, searching. "They were in a bottle."

"I've got them already," said Rose. "I took them home."

"Did you? Did you show your father?"

"Yes."

"Oh, well, that's where they are then," said Flo, and she lay down and closed her eyes.

The story ends here. Her misunderstanding is not mocked or corrected or even interpreted by Rose. The omniscient narrator's remarks are descriptive rather than interpretive: "She pulled at the sheets, searching. . . . [S]he lay down and closed her eyes." There is no indication that Rose directs the narration; instead, readers are given only her verbalized responses to Flo. By concluding with Flo's language and movements the story privileges incomprehensibility, depicting otherness without a narrator's interpretation or explanation. Not only has Rose taken on the role of witness, willing to listen to uninterpretable testimony, but readers are similarly pulled toward Flo, fashioned by the narration into witnesses to what Felman calls the "scandal of illness," to the trauma of afflicted old age (4). Here one sees ethical responsibility in action, a respect for otherness that causes Rose to participate in, rather than "correct," absurdity. It is here, in the uninterpreted language of delusion, that readers glimpse the positive potential of empathetic witnessing, a dialogic model of relations in which understanding and misunderstanding can coexist.

This kind of paradoxical relationship, with its moments of fruitful, and even pleasurable, miscommunication, is far from the alienation and horror of later-life dementia experienced in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. In Franzen's novel, Alfred, the aging Lambert family patriarch, undergoes a painfully isolated descent into delusions induced by Parkinson's disease. The fleeting insights into otherness that facilitate moments of responsibility and exchange in "Bear" and "Spelling" give way to the terrifyingly absolute alienation in *The Corrections*. In Franzen's novel, narrative perspective is dispersed among the various family members, allowing the reader to consider events from a variety of angles. But the varied focalization is countered by a paucity of communication between the family members. To a large degree, these characters are strangers to one another, and there are a number of references to their fear of one another and their trepidation at the prospect of forced interaction. At the head of this detached family is Alfred, whose preference for guarded existence is largely responsible for the family's estrangement. Alfred aligns seclusion with personhood ("Without privacy there was no point in being an individual" [465]) and separation with love ("The odd truth about Alfred was that love, for him, was a matter not of approaching but of keeping away" [526]). As a result, the novel depicts five characters, parents Alfred and Enid and their three children, Gary, Chip, and Denise, trapped in often desperate, and overwhelmingly private, struggles against the unhappiness of their lives. This ethos of exclusionary identity has serious repercussions as the characters, particularly Alfred, age. For Alfred, the process of aging into old

age is complicated by the debilitations of Parkinson's disease; body tremors, hallucinations, and memory failure flout his demand for authoritative independence. For Alfred, the unavoidable consequence of an old age complicated by illness is a crushing loss of self. In ascribing to a masculine model of rigid, authority-based identity, Alfred inhibits the possibility of the ethical insight experienced in Munro's stories. Alfred experiences the uncanniness of pathological aging only as a horrifying unraveling of self that leaves him stranded as empowered independence gives way to terrifying alienation.<sup>22</sup> Alfred's later-life illness forces a debilitating confrontation with radical impermanence that is without the consolations of collaboration represented in the other texts. Unlike the victims of dementia in *Barney's Version*, *Iris*, "Bear," and "Spelling," Alfred has no witness to hear his stories, no comedic collaborator.

Alfred's dementia manifests itself in terrifying, grotesque hallucinations in which the "filth" he has so vigorously rejected throughout his life returns to haunt him: a "turd" appears in the night to taunt him, screaming obscenities, dirtying the walls and bedding (284–87). These hallucinations reflect the frightening confusion that results from utter privacy, the strictly insular self-reliance of a closed man. Throughout his life he has refused others' attempts to listen and collaborate, the efforts of his wife and children to participate in his life narratives. As his illness worsens the stories he tells himself about his life get out of hand, his suffering aggravated by his devotion to a rigid model of selfhood that relies on impermeable barriers between self and other, perceiving others as dangerous opponents, duplicitous strangers. As a result, the recognition of otherness within is absolutely terrifying. An identity based on unrelenting rigidity and restraint cannot tolerate the appearance of its own instability and uncanniness; these hallucinations tear his world to shreds, transforming him into a railing, desperate man. His otherness, his failure, must be hidden. As a result, there are few opportunities for collaboration and caregiving, or for ethical insight.

All that Alfred has rejected, in particular his own difference and desire, returns in his repulsive hallucination. It is notable that the phantom appears directly after the narration of an episode from the past in which

22. Franzen's personal essay "My Father's Brain," concerning his father's deterioration due to Alzheimer's, reflects a similar bias for independence and mastery. In the essay Franzen mourns his father's agonizing loss of abilities but finds some solace in evidence of his father's enduring authority and force. For example, an unsent letter "become[s] an emblem of invisibly heroic exertions of the will" (*How to Be Alone* 34); his father's refusal of a swab to clear his mouth shows he was "determined to die and to die, as best he could, on his own terms" (36).

he had reluctantly indulged his sexual desires, what he regards as “a defilement in pursuit of satisfaction” (282). For Alfred, witnessing is linked to judgment, to castigation and shame. After his “defilement” of his wife he imagines his unborn daughter as a “witness to such harm. Witness to a tautly engorged little brain that dipped in and out. . . . Alfred lay catching his breath and repenting his defiling of the baby” (281). He sees sex as “the pleasure he’d stolen,” the “stabbing she’d endured” (281). The hallucinated turd is a manifestation of the judgmental witness he fears, one who will expose his shameful failings. In Kristeva’s terms, excrement is clearly abject, at once unavoidably human and utterly other. The abject exposes the fragility of the border between the “I” and “that which I am not,” which is necessary for our constitution as subjects, the ease with which difference, and therefore meaning, can be collapsed. In other words, excrement, the abject, is “what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3). According to Kristeva, a disavowal of shit represents an attempt to jettison the decay of the body, to refuse an underlying sameness that threatens to replace structures of meaning based on difference with a kind of grotesque continuity. Alfred’s abject turd flouts his longing for order and control by destroying boundaries and abolishing difference. It is “sociopathic,” “loose,” “opposed to all strictures,” promising to sully his clothes with a stinking trace of animality (Franzen 285). In this rather heavy-handed symbolism, Alfred’s aging, his illness—conditions that the novel repeatedly intertwines—produce an utter loss of control that undoes the identity Alfred has worked so hard to preserve, a selfhood based on discipline and control.

“Civilization depends upon restraint,” Alfred responds to the turd’s championing of self-indulgence (285). The hallucination reflects a distinctly Freudian reading of civilization and identity, producing a nightmare vision of emancipation in which the hedonistic Id has entirely overcome the responsible Ego; otherness has invaded selfhood. This symbolic struggle between Alfred’s devotion to his “civilized” facade and his own repressed desires participates in the discourse of uncanny age. Alfred’s aging and debilitation produce an identity in conflict as the facades of authority and stability give way to a chaotic multiplicity. It is no coincidence that “[t]he turd had an attitude, a tone of voice, that Alfred found eerily familiar but couldn’t quite place” (286). Alfred hallucinates a confrontation with a narrative of self he would seek to deny, a narrative of licentiousness, eager domination, and xenophobic rage. When Alfred exclaims that the

hideous intruder belongs in jail, it responds with a page-long tirade that exposes the ugly underbelly of Alfred's exclusionary instincts. Alfred, the turd explains, would see "*everything* in jail" and it proceeds to list the many offending others, others whose apparent messiness necessitates punishment: kids "drop food on the carpet," Polynesians "track sand in the house, get fish juice on the furniture," "pubescent chickies" expose their "honkers," "Negroes" drink and sweat and dance and make noise, Caribbeans carry "viruses," the Chinese eat slimy food, women "trail Kleenexes and Tampaxes everywhere they go," and the list goes on (287). This tirade against the perceived excesses of others exposes Alfred's compulsive rejection of otherness as dangerous and vile, a violent refusal that reflects his terror at his own crumbling identity. Alfred anxiously projects frightening, repulsive otherness onto women, children, and visible minorities in response to his growing awareness of his own undeniable and offensive otherness.

Toward the end of the novel, when the family has come together for what promises to be their final reunion, the severity of Alfred's illness becomes undeniable. As the three children observe the painful effects of the disease, they have various opportunities to provide their father with care. Gary, Denise, and Chip assist their father despite their own unease, even disgust, at the changes of age. They witness their father in abject vulnerability—struggling to bathe, dress, give himself an enema. Invariably the children adopt, if only briefly, the role of caregiver, a function they find painful and disorienting. Alfred's pathological aging introduces his children to a kind of horror that shakes their own selfhood. When Gary walks in on Alfred standing naked in the bathtub, hallucinating, he finds his father's uncanniness disturbingly contagious:

Gary himself was infected, there in the middle of the night, by his father's disease. As the two of them collaborated on the problem of the diaper, . . . Gary, too, had a sensation of things dissolving around him, of a night that consisted of creepings and shiftings and metamorphoses. He had the sense that there were many more than two people in the house beyond the bedroom door . . . phantoms. (501)

This is the dark side of aging's radical instability. Here, collaboration results in a mutual haunting that upsets any sense of reliable stability and drives apart rather than draws together the collaborating agents. Gary's insights expose him to a recognition of otherness that disturbs the foundations of his own subjectivity. The world around Gary seems to be in

the process of disintegrating, the unified singularity of identity an impossible fiction: there are no longer only “two people in the house beyond the bedroom door”—the world has begun a process of multiplication that destabilizes meaning and identity. The inclusion of the term “metamorphoses” is integral; Gary is unwillingly taking on the uncanny vision of radical impermanence. Gary himself becomes afflicted, in Felman’s terms, as “an unwitting, inadvertent . . . *involuntary witness*” to “an illness whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization” (Felman and Lamb 4, original emphasis). He becomes witness to the radical alterity of temporality that appears as aging into old age.

Throughout his life Alfred has no witnesses or collaborators. There is little possibility of collaboration, exchange, or sharing because these are not part of his aggressively independent vocabulary. He interprets his sudden need for assistance as pathetic, as a failure. His children’s assistance comes without his request or appreciation. It is only near the novel’s end, when Alfred is overwhelmed by despair at his helplessness, that he calls out for help. However, his final call to the other, a call for annihilation, is in vain. He would prefer nonbeing to impotent existence and asks his son to relieve him from the suffering of helplessness. But his request is one of total self-interest, one that can be made only by ignoring the humanity of the other. Despite the fact that such an act would do excessive violence to his son, Alfred’s need for private independence trumps his concern for others. Indeed, his earlier decision *not* to commit suicide was the result of his suffocating need for privacy and control, the extreme exposure of his blasted body turning him away from death: “But to be seen as the finite carcass in a sea of blood and bone chips and gray matter—to inflict that version of himself on other people—was a violation of privacy so profound it seemed it would outlive him” (466). Though his justifications show an ostensible concern for others, his desire to protect others from trauma is also, or even primarily, a self-protective urge.

When Alfred is finally transferred to “Deepmire” care facility, Alfred regards himself as a prisoner of a brutal authority bent on revenge. His rage at his own helplessness continues to surface in violent racist outbursts, this time expressed as a hatred for the black staff. Old age, particularly pathological old age, devastates the power and privilege he has enjoyed all his life as a middle-class white man. His impotent dependence on others is not only embarrassing to him but also enraging, since he is now at the mercy of those he once dominated. Old age and illness have introduced him to the space of otherness, an otherness he resists by attempting to reinstate the boundaries and hierarchies that have always maintained

his identity. Alfred transforms a black, female staff member at Deepmire into a demon bent on revenge: “The big black lady, the mean one, the bastard, was the one he had to keep an eye on. She intended to make his life a hell. She stood at the far end of the prison yard throwing him significant glances to remind him that she hadn’t forgotten him, she was still in hot pursuit of her vendetta” (553). Alfred’s delusions suggest a kind of perverse insight into his own culpability, some reluctant awareness of a legacy of domination worthy of revenge. His paranoia seizes upon a figure of marked difference, and his racist and sexist, and later homophobic, epithets betray his acute anxiety—“That fat black bastard, that nasty black bitch over there, held his eye and nodded across the white heads of the other prisoners: *I’m gonna get you*” (553, original emphasis). Old age and illness have produced a leveling that terrifies and triggers a flailing, pathetic violence as Alfred attempts to defend himself against this would-be attacker: “He lunged as she came at him, but his belt had got stuck in the chair” (554). Alfred’s unsuccessful struggle to free himself from the restraints confirms his absolute powerlessness: “Trying to work [his fingers] under the belt was so *obviously and utterly hopeless*—the belt had such overwhelming advantages of toughness and tightness—that his efforts soon became merely a pageant of spite and rage and incapacity” (554–55, original emphasis). Such hysterical rage is not uncommon in sufferers of dementia. One can only imagine the terror and confusion of such sudden strangeness, of being trapped in an unfamiliar and apparently threatening world. All of the narratives discussed in this chapter involve the eventual institutionalization of the afflicted person, but this move has very diverse effects. There is a degree of rage, even violent rage, experienced by Alfred, and to a lesser extent, Barney, that is not as apparent in Iris, Fiona, or Flo. For male sufferers of dementia, particularly for the Anglo-Saxon patriarch, Alfred, there is danger in confronting radical impermanence since such fluidity exposes the transience of his power and authority. As Alfred enters the space of illness, of old age, of difference, he experiences a loss of the prerogatives of strength and youth, race and class, that he cannot abide.

The various texts included in this chapter present a gendered vision of aging and later-life dementia, suggesting that the recognition of radical instability provokes different crises in men and women. Though aging may indeed initiate some neutralization, or at least subordination, of gender difference, as discussed earlier, these narratives of dementia and caregiv-

ing show that gender remains highly determinant in our experiences of aging and illness, a phenomenon discussed further in chapter 3. In *The Corrections*, Alfred's rage is largely the result of his suffocating dedication to conventionally masculine models of identity based primarily on exclusion and domination. This kind of imperial perspective means that his sense of self is devastated as he becomes a victim, a colonized other. Franzen's nonfictional account of his own father's dementia furthers such a patriarchal perspective: the only images of hope in the essay involve Franzen's final accounts of his father's "heroic" persevering power, the triumph of his father's "will" (34). The texts I discuss in this chapter suggest that the resilient cultural scripts of masculinity and femininity greatly determine both how "we" (the unafflicted) interpret victims of late-life dementia, and indeed how those victims experience their own disabilities. The moments of pleasure, even grace, afforded the afflicted characters in these stories and film are restricted to the female victims: Iris's solitary dance, Fiona's new love and sudden recognition, Flo and Rose's shared moment of humor. By contrast, each male sufferer responds with violence: at one point Barney smashes his face into a mirror (411), and Alfred struggles to attack his attendants.<sup>23</sup>

It appears in these texts that gender complicates the processes of witnessing, of collaboration and ethical responsibility. Patriarchal models of behavior inhibit some of the dialogic potential of caregiving: where Rose and Flo may experience a fleeting moment of levity that allows for a kind of communication and understanding that can accommodate difference, the father-son alliances in *Barney's Version* and *The Corrections* involve discrete individuals in distant dialogue.<sup>24</sup> Both *Barney's Version* and *The*

23. See also Caroline Adderson's *A History of Forgetting* for a rather melodramatic vision of dementia as a grotesque exaggeration of patriarchal violence. The afflicted character in that novel becomes suddenly anti-Semitic and homophobic, much like Alfred Lambert. Such constructions produce a highly symbolic version of aging and illness as the return of a kind of repressed primitive self, a vicious and destructive Id, unfettered by civilizing forces.

24. I am not suggesting that women are more *capable* of constructive collaboration. As Lorraine York points out in her study of women's collaborative writing, too often our interpretations of gendered collaboration have been colored by romantic visions of maternal kindness. York explains that "for the most part I have found a strong tendency to celebrate women's collaborations unproblematically and idealistically. This tendency is particularly strong in North America, home of influential feminist theories that see women as more other-directed and caring, and thus more given to relational ethics and collaborative problem-solving" (6). Though I do not subscribe to a model of untroubled fusion of subjects, I believe York's observation speaks to our expectations for, and even construction of, gendered collaboration. The idealization of women's

*Corrections* involve “corrections,” though Michael Panofsky’s pedantic footnotes are perhaps gentler than the resentment-fueled responses of the Lamberts to Alfred’s disabilities. Nevertheless, as all of these narratives imply, there is a delicate balance necessary for respectful witnessing, a willingness to accept both the comprehensible *and* the incomprehensible, the familiar *and* the strange. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominick LaCapra proposes a particular definition of “empathy,” one that refuses its common association with “identification or fusion with the other” (212). Instead, LaCapra contends that “empathy should rather be understood in terms of an affective relation, rapport, or bond with the other recognized and respected as other. It may be further related to the affirmation of otherness within the self—otherness that is not purely and discreetly other” (212–13). It is just this kind of difficult relation, and revelation, that later-life dementia can demand. In these fictional narratives, dementia poses serious challenges for both its victims and their empathetic witnesses (challenges further complicated by the demands of a patriarchal culture) as they struggle to maintain some sense of self in the face of such an acute demonstration of radical instability. Fictional representations of later-life dementia can reveal subjects confronting head-on the nonfixity of identity, the crude force of change that can make aging at once alarming, enlightening, and uncanny.

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collaboration suggests that men’s collaborative relationships are imagined as the antithesis, that is, as somehow inherently difficult and fraught. Whether intrinsic or not, the belief in the “naturalness” of women’s collaboration and the challenge of men’s greatly determines the operation of such partnerships. In novels such as *Barney’s Version* and *The Corrections*, collaboration between men carries its own ideological baggage. In his treatment of male literary collaboration, Wayne Koestenbaum establishes the collaborative writer as one “who keenly feels *lack* or disenfranchisement, and seeks out a partner to attain *power and completion*” (2, emphasis added). He continues by proposing that post-1885 (the year of the Labouchère Amendment), collaboration “was a complicated and anxiously homosocial act” (3), claiming that “[c]ertain desires and dreads regularly follow in the double signature’s wake: hysterical discontinuity, muteness, castratory violence, homoerotic craving, misogyny, a wish to usurp female generative powers” (4). York’s and Koestenbaum’s divergent critical strategies speak to the very different cultural scripts that often overdetermine the theory and practice of gendered collaboration, namely the assumption that women are cooperative and men combative. York often emphasizes conflicts in collaboration and the difficulty of fusion, while Koestenbaum is particularly interested in the subversive homoeroticism of men’s collaboration, claiming that “men who collaborate engage in metaphorical sexual intercourse” (3). Though the collaborations in these texts are not explicitly engaged with questions of authorship, many of the same anxieties and difficulties plague the participants.