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Uncanny Subjects

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CONCLUSION

UNCANNY AGING, UNCANNY SELVES

It is true that the statement “All men are mortal” is paraded in textbooks of logic as an example of a general proposition; but no human being really grasps it, and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality.

—Freud, “The Uncanny” 364

*In the spring the flowers will melt,
also the berries,
and something will come to eat them.
We will go around in these circles for a time,
winter summer winter,
and, after more time, not.*

This is a good thought.

—Margaret Atwood, “Ob”

HOW DOES ONE understand, adapt to, interpret, live with the seeming simultaneous sameness and difference that accompanies old age? I raised this question in the introduction to this book. In the chapters that followed I stressed transience and instability, arguing that the continual transformation resulting from one’s status as temporal subject becomes increasingly apparent, and often problematic, as one ages into old age. Older subjects often confront, or, perhaps more accurately, *are confronted by*, the nonfixity and multiplicity of identity at odds with popular fictions of “true” selves and resilient “cores.” I have demonstrated the many forms such confrontations can take, examining literature and film that explore uncanny aging in a range of scenarios: the older narrator looking back on his or her life, caregivers and patients struggling with old age compli-

cated by pathology, subjects facing their own altered image, all situations in which characters confront their own aging, and consequently their own difference.

In her analyses of literary criticism, Barbara Johnson has repeatedly drawn attention to internal inconsistencies that larger patterns of categorization obscure. In *The Critical Difference* Johnson asserts that “[t]he differences *between* entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence),” and, I would add, young and old, “are shown to be based on a repression of differences *within* entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself” (x–xi). Throughout this book I have proposed that aging into old age strains this repression and triggers unsettling revelations of uncanny identity, of “difference *within*.” Some aging studies theorists elide this pervasive and persistent internal difference by restricting uncanniness to later life, interpreting old age as a state that produces a newly divisive subject (for example, Biggs, Hepworth, Holland). Aging theorists have produced a great deal of scholarship on identity in later life, often suggesting that both biological and cultural forces seriously adjust selfhood as subjects enter old age. My own view shifts the site of late-life “newness” from *selfhood* to *self-perception*. Throughout the preceding chapters I have contended that aging into old age does not alter the function or condition of identity itself, but rather, that later life often disrupts our interpretations of subjectivity, dissolving facades of wholeness and stability that obscure the fundamentally unstable human condition. At odds with the fixing effects of popular discourse—the plethora of greeting cards, popular films, jokes, and clichés that enforce polarities of old and young—the aging subject, even the youthful aging subject, is never still, never safely ensconced within a temporal category, since every year, every day, every moment produces alteration. Aging inevitably exposes the illusion of boundaries since the ongoing modification of the subject must inevitably assert itself. As one ages it may become increasingly difficult to distract oneself with overattention to differences between, as difference within becomes undeniably apparent.

Over the course of this book I have offered a widening perspective on uncanny aging, moving from the intimate, internalized realm of (fictional) personal histories and reminiscence to the more public field of specular images. From the first chapter, which concerns processes of reflection and introspection, through the interaction of cognitively impaired subjects and their familial caregivers in the second chapter, to the third chapter’s treatment of specular aging, uncanny revelations haunt every scenario. In each of the chapters there is a tension between various, and often conflicting, versions of identity: between those supplied by narrators and their

narratives, sufferers and their caregivers, images (reflections, photographs, films) and their human subjects. In these fictional texts, life review, the disruptions of dementia, the glimpse in a mirror, all draw attention to a fundamental mortal instability at odds with impressions of permanence. Despite their different circumstances, the characters in these texts share an altered awareness of identity and time that moves them closer to the recognition of oneself as another. The various conflicts arising from aging into old age in all of these texts reflect a persistent and irresolvable tension between the fluidity of time and characters' staccato-like apprehension of it, which segments time into discrete moments, periods, and ages. The language of aging reflects the problem of shifting versus static identity: the comparative adjective "older" reflects the constancy of aging, and as a result it is a perpetually accurate description of ourselves and others. But the absolutism of the noun "old" enforces the stratification of time and identity, which is arbitrary yet formative. When we are designated "old," or designate ourselves "old," we are fixed and determined by the classification. This temporal categorization, the result of what Woodward calls our "arithmetical" relation to time and aging (*Discontents* 185), produces aging as remarkable and sudden.

So how does one tolerate temporality, that is, an embodied existence subject to constant change that inevitably topples boundaries and categories? Ricoeur suggests that we are protected from the volatility of such mutability by the minute scale of perpetual alteration, by the ability of aging to "threaten resemblance without destroying it" (*Oneself* 117). Throughout the preceding chapters I have examined points of temporal fracture within the hypothetically smooth process of modification, moments when characters suddenly apprehend the changes of aging, perceiving the differences between past and present, young and old selves, that invariably invoke some awareness (however much denied) of the differences *within* the self. My contention is that this awakening to difference carries with it the potential for increased ethical understanding. In the literature and films I have explored, the conflict that arises between competing versions of self provokes a new comprehension of the uncanniness of identity.

SHIFTING FOCUS

Strategies of Response and Resistance

But what does one *do* with such uncanny revelation? In addition to questions concerning identity construction, the introduction raised another,

perhaps thornier issue, one regarding strategies of response. Once exposed to our own uncanniness, the unsettling sameness and difference produced by aging, how does one assimilate such an awareness without succumbing to the despair, or even mania, that plague so many of the characters discussed in this book? How does one understand, adapt to, interpret, live with the aftermath of uncanny revelation? In chapter 3 I returned to the issue of response, particularly to *productive* response, concluding my discussion of the “mania of dissemblance” on a hopeful note, suggesting that the comedic parody in *Opening Night* reflects the potential of alternative discourses of aging, strategies of resistance that can undermine, if not always overwrite, the oppressively grim cultural scripts of aging.

Perhaps, as many aging studies scholars suggest, reassigning the cultural meaning of aging into old age is possible, and necessary;¹ however, such a revision would depend, I think, on an altered relationship to temporality, mutability, and strangers, since our antipathy toward aging stems largely from our anxieties surrounding difference and alterity, particularly our own.² My own view does not anticipate a change in popular meanings of age as loss and decline, but rather hopes for the cultivation of perspectives that *acknowledge* these bleak associations while promoting alternative interpretations and perceptions. Laughter at the absurdity of aging is common, and although many comedic treatments of old age appear to favor reinforcement rather than resistance, I would hesitate to dismiss ridiculous caricatures, such as Aunt Augusta in Graham Greene’s *Travels with My Aunt*, or those played by Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Shirley MacLaine, and others, in a variety of films. Though this conclusion cannot accommodate a prolonged analysis of the various, and often contradictory, functions of comedy, I would like to observe that ridiculous older characters can often upset, if only temporarily, the overattention to youthful heterosexual romance that dominates popular narratives, pointing to

1. Proponents of such revision include Christine Overall, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Joseph Esposito, and, to a lesser extent, Kathleen Woodward and Stephen Katz.

2. Indeed, the rapidly expanding anti-aging industry effectively divides aging and change, firmly aligning the latter with deficiency. Advertising campaigns for anti-aging products repeatedly claim to have no quarrel with aging itself, but merely with the visual alterations it inflicts. According to popular culture, it is fine to *be* sixty, as long as one does not *look* sixty, a phenomenon Patricia Mellencamp labels “*chronology disavowal*” (286, original emphasis). In discussing the ever-increasing opportunities to “correct” the signs of aging, Mellencamp imagines the amplified marginalization that could result: “Given the uninsured cost of plastic surgery, ‘looking old’ might become just another disadvantage of being poor” (288).

the continuation of life beyond matchmaking. Such characters often have a trivializing touch, undermining youthful gravity with their absurd perspectives. Though invariably marginalized, older trickster figures and fools provide glimpses of resistant laughter that warrant further investigation.

But as much as laughter and comedic resistance burst through dreary expectations of loss and mourning that accompany narratives of aging, hilarity is difficult to maintain and further tactics prove necessary. Gerontology provides some suggestions. Traditionally, scientific research into aging has tended to focus on deterioration and pathology, but recently there are researchers who counter these dismal trajectories with attention to changes besides loss.³ Clinical researchers and social scientists have begun to investigate adaptation over time, acknowledging the unavoidability of age-related change without attending exclusively to decline and deterioration. Some gerontological researchers have moved toward a more “multidimensional and multidirectional conception of ageing,” one that includes, “besides decline, the possibility of growth or other forms of advance” (Baltes, Freund, and Li 48). This new perspective has produced, among others, the “SOC” theory of aging, which focuses on various age-related changes and the *Substitution, Optimization, and Compensation* that result. The SOC theory takes account of *development*, of positive adaptation that can result from the various changes that occur over the lifespan (Baltes, Freund, and Li 54). The shift in focus from changes, in and of themselves, to their *management* introduces researchers to a wide variety of strategies and responses beyond anxiety and distress. Though unsettling strangeness may be undeniable, constructive adaptation is possible.

Likewise, fiction and film addressing the process of aging into old age offer more than narratives of regrettable and unavoidable loss. Without refuting the difficulties of aging, narrative texts often incorporate positive and constructive perspectives on becoming older, depicting characters who nurture the pleasures that persist, and even flourish, over time. Chief among such satisfactions is corporeal pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure. But popular culture often translates late-life sexuality into late-life hedonism, emphasizing the humor of supposedly excessive desire in older subjects. Indeed, comedic “geezer” caricatures often derive much of

3. For a helpful overview of gerontology’s increasing attention to the gains of aging, see Ronald J. Manheimer, “Wisdom and Method: Philosophical Contributions to Gerontology.” Associations between later life and wisdom are long-standing and the subject of debate in aging studies. See chapter 1 for the details of Erik Erikson’s life cycle, which stresses old age as a time of integrity and wisdom.

their humor from their supposedly ridiculous, and even unseemly, desire. Characters such as Aunt Augusta in *Travels with My Aunt*, Maude from Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude*, Maurice in Roger Michell's *Venus*, or the lecherous old Grandpa Gustafson in Donald Petrie's *Grumpy Old Men* all capitalize on the scandal of sexual desire in old age. "Outrageous" older characters, such as Maude and Maurice, confront their younger counterparts with an affronting sameness—their altered bodies retain desire—that undermines the polarities of sexual youth and neutered old age.⁴

The unabating pleasures of sex not only are the subject of comedic treatments of old age but also frequently appear in serious narratives of aging, often as illicit and disgraceful enactments of desire that contribute to an older character's downfall. In particular, texts exploring the (at least initially) jubilant desire of the old for the young chart the often dangerous repercussions of trespassing generational boundaries. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Doris Lessing's "Grandmothers," along with films such as Roger Michell's *The Mother*, Bill Condon's *Gods and Monsters*, and Richard Eyre's *Notes on a Scandal*, explore sexuality as a continuing source of pleasure and connection for the aging subject, despite the body's changes. But this uncanny persistence of pleasure, at odds with cultural scripts of neutering and diminishment, is commonly transformed into a further site of loss when the "scandalous" affair is finally exposed, the older subject "justifiably" humiliated. Indeed, in each of these texts, "inappropriate" cross-generational desire precipitates some variety of disaster, ranging from loss of employment, to loss of reputation, to loss of life. Relishing the ongoing pleasures of sexuality may be a fulfilling "optimization" of physical ability in later life, but the impropriety of such expressions of vitality proves difficult to escape.⁵ If sex between two older characters is typically the source of comedy, sex between older and younger adults often provokes tragedy.

Of course there are exceptions to the pattern. Alice Munro's story "Floating Bridge" concludes with a private expression of desire between an older woman battling cancer, Jinny, and the teenager who escorts her home through a secret shortcut over a floating bridge. The narrative

4. For more on the "metaphoric neutering" of the elderly, see Hockey and James, "Back to Our Futures: Imaging Second Childhood" (145).

5. It is notable that *The Mother*'s protagonist attempts to engage in "appropriate" sexual behavior by subjecting herself to the desires of a man of her own generation. The result is a harrowing scene of sexual violence. For May, a grandmother and widow, any expression of sexuality has serious repercussions, whether with a man her daughter's age or with one her own age.

provides a detailed description of their lingering kiss, an expression of desire that signals the tingling re-emergence of Jinny's hope for survival (her doctor had offered her a new, tentatively optimistic prognosis earlier that day). The story's final lines communicate Jinny's contemplation of her uncanny liminality, both literally—the bridge she stands on hovers between land and water—and more existentially—her shifting diagnosis positions her somewhere between life and death. The transgressive kiss remains private and pleasurable. But the narrator clearly defines the kiss as “the whole story, all by itself” (*Hateship* 82), allowing for an expression of sensuality and kindness without the alarming prospect of transgressive copulation. Indeed, the kiss is more a narrative act than a sexual one, with its “tender prologue,” “wholehearted probing and receiving,” and “lingering thanks” (82). Kisses between old and young may be productive and permissible, but the pleasures of sex are rarely awarded without complication.

A decidedly less controversial, and subsequently much more common, source of satisfaction for older narrative subjects is the compensatory pleasure of time-earned authority within both the family and the wider community. The trope of the wise elder is far-reaching. The grandparents who appear in novels as diverse as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*, and Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* are empowered by their life experience. By focusing on the intellectual benefits of a longer life spent learning life lessons, these works portray aging into old age as a process of enlightenment.⁶ As well, a selective attention to familial concerns, to the legacy of birth and growth manifested by the appearance of children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren, can help compensate for some of the undeniable losses of old age, particularly the illness or disability of the subject or his or her peers (spouses, siblings, friends). Often fiction and film derive much of their emotional resonance by stressing generational continuity, the close bonds between older characters and their children, their children's children, and so on.

Drawing on assumptions of increased familial concerns, later life is often depicted as a time to return to one's “roots,”⁷ as though prior to old

6. Texts treating aging as a process of enlightenment echo Erik Erikson's theory of late-life wisdom and “integration,” and Lars Tornstam's concept of “gerotranscendence.” For an explanation of these developmental models, see Schroots.

7. Alice Munro's collection of stories *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) illustrates this trend in its reimagining of family history. The first part of the collection transforms the lives of Munro's ancestors into short stories, while the second part compiles stories that Munro describes as “closer to my own life than the other stories

age one takes pains to be unencumbered by family and ancestry. David Lynch's film *The Straight Story* illustrates this trend, following seventy-three-year-old Alvin Straight in his painstaking efforts to be reunited with his estranged brother, a compulsion initiated by a new awareness of mortality: Alvin's brother is ill and Alvin himself has recently suffered a stroke. This narrative of late-life reckoning is a story of adaptation in the extreme. Not only does Alvin travel 250 miles despite impairments to his leg and eyes, but he does so on a riding lawn mower since the stroke has deprived him of his driver's license. With minimal dialogue, the film depicts the solemn consolations of old age: silence, solitude, and the natural world.

The film's *mise-en-scène* literalizes Alvin's expanded perspective in its long shots of landscape, and Alvin himself speaks of the (albeit limited) compensations of becoming older. When a fellow traveler insists, "There must be something good about getting old," Alvin responds, "Well I can't imagine anything good about being blind and lame at the same time, but still at my age I've seen about all that life has to dish out. I know to separate the wheat from the chaff, let the small stuff fall away." In later life Alvin develops an acceptance of, and even appreciation for, that which is incommunicable, even incomprehensible, an expanded perspective reflected in the film's minimal dialogue. Indeed, when he finally reaches his brother, the two exchange few words, and the film concludes with an image of the two old men sitting side-by-side, silently, peacefully enjoying each other's company. As in other films, such as *The Company of Strangers* or Lindsay Anderson's *The Whales of August*, old age functions as a time of quiet companionship or pastoral solitude.⁸ In texts such as these, the broadened perspective of later life introduces characters to a new awareness of time's immensity, that is, to nonhuman time, or what one might call natural time. Within the immense scope of natural time, within the enduring cycle of the seasons, one may regard the minute scale of human existence, and even

I had written, even in the first person" (*Castle Rock* x). Though not entirely autobiographical, in these stories Munro confessed to be "doing something closer to what memoir does—exploring a life, my own life" (x). In the book's epilogue, Munro explicitly connects aging into old age with the urge to discover one's ancestral past. She explains that old age is a time "when our personal futures close down and we cannot imagine—sometimes cannot believe in—the future of our children's children. We can't resist this rifling around in the past, sifting the untrustworthy evidence, linking stray names and questionable dates and anecdotes together, hanging on to threads, insisting on being joined to dead people and therefore to life" (347).

8. This perspective on aging risks slipping into a stereotypical vision of old age as a time when inaction dominates, when "being" overtakes "doing." Though this dichotomy has obvious disadvantages, there are benefits to emphasizing the quiet, inner activity of later life, as Woodward makes clear in her reflections on the "pleasures of inactivity" in older age (*Discontents* 179, original emphasis).

find comfort in one's small participation in the continuity of nature, as in the epigraph to this conclusion from Margaret Atwood. Such an expansive perspective can advance the concerns of multigenerational narratives, allowing for the integration of change and continuity; the family goes on and on, one generation replacing another, presenting the pleasing illusion of perpetuity.

The impossibility of apprehending the minute, ongoing actions of aging means that aging, though constant, often seems to occur suddenly, producing numerous problems for subjectivity and identity, as the previous chapters demonstrate. The underlying temporality of identity results in an uncanny condition that can be difficult to abide since it resists complete comprehension, being always in a process of development. As a result, epistemological traditions accustomed to respecting, and even embracing, incomprehensibility may be well equipped to contend with the uncanniness of aging. In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, the narrator, Reverend John Ames, contemplates the strangeness of his own mortality and the strangeness of divinity with similar awe and resignation. For John Ames, in his mid-seventies, the mystery of mortal existence is both confounding and beautiful, and he looks back at his life (not without an element of sadness and regret) and forward to his own death with a tolerance for its incomprehensibility rarely found in the narratives explored in my previous chapters. Moments of reminiscence, which allow him to be at once in the present and in the past, provoke "sweetness in the experience which I don't understand. But that only enhances the value of it. My point here is that you never do know the actual nature even of your own experience. Or perhaps that it has no fixed and certain nature" (95). In *Gilead*, Christian spirituality assists the narrator in embracing the incomprehensibility, and even the absurdity, of human temporality, of mortality. As a result, *Gilead* offers a moving portrait of age, one that examines uncanny mutability without collapsing into despair or mania.

Ames's narrative of reminiscence eschews narrative totality by incorporating spirituality and addressing profundity and irresolution directly without the goal of comprehension or clear conclusions. He embraces the grand mystery of earthly existence and at the same time attends to the concrete details of the everyday. The novel raises the possibility of perceiving the constitutive instability of selfhood without crisis. Ames's trust in divinity heightens both his awareness and his accommodation of the strangeness and mysteriousness of existence.⁹ *Gilead* is a compelling response to

9. The closest secular approximation of Ames's perspective might be found in *The Company of Strangers*, which includes contemplative scenes of wordless "being" and reminiscence that do not serve a larger teleological project.

Johnson's criticism of the problematic overattention to differences *between* entities in order to shroud those more difficult, even alarming, differences *within*. For John Ames, the revelations of his own strangeness brought on by age are confirmations of a larger mystery that couples all his regrets over temporal changes with awe at the movements of life. Aging teaches Ames to understand the limits of his own understanding:

People talk about how wonderful the world seems to children, and that's true enough. But children think they will grow into it and understand it, and I know very well that I will not, and would not if I had a dozen lives. That's clearer to me every day. Each morning I'm like Adam waking up in Eden, amazed at the cleverness of my hands and at the brilliance pouring into my mind through my eyes—old hands, old eyes, old mind, a very diminished Adam altogether, and still it is just remarkable. (66)

In *Gilead* readers discover a narrator who not only *tolerates* mystery and strangeness within but respects and even loves the incomprehensible since for him it is an element of grace.

For the narrating Reverend, the Christian tradition provides a means for approaching and appreciating the mysteriousness of existence, both his own and others', a perspective that recalls Levinas's theories of alterity and responsibility, which emphasize the subject's fundamental obligation to the other (as discussed in chapter 2). Levinas is not alone in emphasizing obligation as primary to humanity, though not all moral philosophers cast responsibility in such terms. There is a substantial body of criticism that regards care as a fundamental human need, privileging caring relations as primary, sustaining, and fulfilling. Theorists of the ethics of care, such as Virginia Held, Eva Kittay, Carol Gilligan, and Maurice Hamington, stress that life itself is founded upon caring human relations, insisting that identity is first and foremost relational and dependent: "[t]he fact of human vulnerability and frailty that dependency underscores must function in our very conception of ourselves as subjects and moral agents" (Kittay and Feder 3). The burdensome obligation that Levinas describes is recast as the source of humanity and meaning. Held describes "persons as embedded and encumbered" (15), drawing on Gilligan's explication of the "paradoxical truths of human experience—that we know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationships only insofar as we differentiate other from self" (Gilligan 63). As Held, Gilligan, and others point out, such "encumbered-ness" is too easily overlooked or dismissed in a culture that privileges independence

and individuality. The illness and disability that often accompany aging into old age upend illusions of autonomous identity, of persons as discrete, independent, and comprehensible. According to philosopher Kelly Oliver, dependence and independence are paradoxically entwined, each one producing the other:

[O]ne's own independence requires acknowledging one's indebtedness to the world and others. . . . [T]his dependent foundation of subjectivity brings with it an ethical obligation to the world and others. Dependence is not a sign of a lack of freedom or a lack of agency; and independence is not total disconnection from others and the earth. Insofar as subjectivity is produced in, and sustained by, our relation to the world and others, an ethical obligation lies at the heart of subjectivity itself. ("Subjectivity" 324–25)

For Oliver, "subjectivity and humanity" depend on what she calls "response-ability," that is, "the ability to respond and be responded to" (*Witnessing* 91). The transformation of "responsibility" into "response-ability" enables a "double sense" of both "opening up the ability to respond—response-ability—and ethically obligating subjects to respond by virtue of their very subjectivity itself" (91). For ethics of care theorists, obligation to and dependence on others is neither unusual nor temporary, but is a predictable and necessary aspect of human existence. With "encumbered-ness" comes "embeddedness," that is, with burdensome responsibility come the human relationships essential for life and meaning.

The inevitability of dependence and responsibility, often exposed by aging into old age, can force subjects to confront uncanny identity and their obligation "to respond to what is beyond . . . comprehension, beyond recognition, because ethics is possible only beyond recognition" (Oliver 106). John Ames's profoundest apprehension of the wondrous incomprehensibility of mortality comes in expressions of love for others, both in formal bestowals of blessings and in private interactions and exchanges with family and friends. His respect for both the alterity of the other and the alterity of the self produces a variety of ethical dilemmas in which he must examine the hierarchy of his commitments, choosing whether to prioritize forgiveness or protection, family or others, contemplation or action. The ethical predicaments that arise out of Ames's efforts to respect and cherish the mystery of identity, both the self's and the other's, expose the fundamental importance and ethical complexity of expressions of care. In Robinson's novel, aging into old age involves an increasing admiration for

the mysteriousness of the other, as well as the innate mysteriousness of the self, demonstrating the immense power of what is commonly called love. But just as *Gilead* glorifies the incomprehensibility of the human subject and its relations, it also shows the difficulty of “appropriately” responding to such glorious, incomprehensible others.

With its exposure of the uncanniness of identity and potential to awaken the subject to the mystery of others, aging into old age can provoke a new appreciation for human connections, as seen in the narratives of aging that celebrate family connections, ancestry, and generational continuity (Choy, MacLeod, Munro, Robinson). As one ages into extreme old age, late-life illness and disability often increase dependence on others. For such subjects, contemplating “care” is far from a sentimental or frivolous pursuit since its expressions are increasingly linked to comfort and even survival. The centrality of care returns me to earlier questions of survival. How does one live with the simultaneous sameness and difference that emerges in old age? Perhaps the most promising and probable answer is “with assistance.” The operations of identity and responsibility explored throughout this book, particularly in chapter 2, lead me to believe that the meaning and function of “care” are fundamental to discussions of subjectivity and alterity, not only as one ages into old age, but throughout the life course. Relationality is central to the condition of identity, and the human interaction that occurs in caregiving confirms the fundamental importance of dependence and responsibility in discussions of selfhood.

In chapter 1, I referred to Barthes’s oft-cited correlation of aging and photographic representation as twin producers of disincarnation. The assessment of aging as “disincarnation” says as much about the means of apprehension as it does about aging itself. Perceived through cultural lenses and frames that, much like the photograph, arrest the fluidity of human temporality, segmenting the life course and the population into dualistic categories of old and young, “over the hill” or still approaching it, aging may indeed appear as a process of dissemblance and disintegration. However, it is possible, if only occasionally, to perceive the uncanniness of our continuous alteration. Tolerating, and even appreciating, one’s own aging, with all its ensuing strangeness, absurdity, and indecipherability, can be a profoundly political act since, by recognizing this strangeness within, one may find a new tolerance for the strangeness of others. As such, the uncanniness of aging can affirm that “strangers are both *within* us and *beyond* us” (Kearney, *Strangers* 229, original emphasis), leading us closer to a productive space of respect and dialogue. As Kearney insists, “strangeness need not always estrange us to the point of dehumanisation”

(231); that which is beyond the limits of human comprehension need not provoke only anxiety and despair. With echoes of Levinas, Robinson's character John Ames proposes that the face of the other is a "vision" that can provoke a "mystical" awareness of incarnation, and its corresponding responsibilities: "in my present situation, now that I am about to leave this world, I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face. . . . It has something to do with incarnation. You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it" (66). If aging is at least partly a process of disincarnation, contact with the other can return us to the space of incarnation, transferring our attention away from diminishing capabilities to the enduring mystery of identity and existence, both within and without.

ENDINGS

Discussions of aging are always obliquely discussions of mortality. The same might be said of the uncanny. The prospect of such an absolute conclusion is so unthinkable as to demand strenuous, ongoing repression, as the epigraph from Freud that opens this conclusion indicates. The mortal condition is unavoidably uncanny: though death is our guaranteed conclusion, it remains unknown and incomprehensible. For all of Freud's efforts to expose our repression of our own inevitable ending, his literary endings are notoriously indirect and diverting. "The Uncanny" concludes with a rather arresting redirection. Directly after elucidating some of the differences between the effects of certain uncanny events and their literary representations, Freud ends his essay with a brief paragraph: "Concerning the factors of silence, solitude and darkness we can say only that they are actually elements in the production of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free. This problem has been discussed from a psychoanalytic point of view elsewhere" (376). This startling change of subject substitutes diversion for summary, drawing attention to the essay's own lack of explanation, thereby reinstating uncanniness.

In "The Uncanny," Freud delves into various "primitive" and infantile anxieties that have been buried over time only to be unearthed by some sight or sound that consequently becomes uncanny, but he repeatedly shuttles these "factors" ("silence, solitude and darkness") to the periphery of his discussion (376, 369). According to Freud, silence, solitude, and dark-

ness are unrelentingly distressing, their power to unsettle never overcome by maturation. Often aging into old age returns these anxiety-provoking “factors” to the forefront of daily experience, but communication, company, and illumination can counter their effect. The frequent necessity of assistance in later life emphasizes the relationality of subjectivity, forcing one to reckon with both one’s debt to, and responsibility for, the other. Denying the difficulties of aging, whether increased silence and solitude, illness or disability, or awareness of darkness and death, is counterproductive. Seizing new possibilities, perceptions, and relations that arise from perpetual modification can relieve, or least mitigate, some of these disabilities. The “biological facts” that guarantee the “dreaded decline” Beauvoir laments (46) are only one part of the story of aging. Narrative fiction and film remind us of our own narrativity, our uncanny condition as perpetually “in progress,” and both the fragility and possibility such instability ensures.