

## “And then—”

### Narrative Identity and Uncanny Aging in *The Stone Angel*

The notion that human subjects are constituted by narrative has become something of a theoretical truism. As Kathleen Woodward puts it, “To *have* a life means to possess its narrative” (emphasis hers, *Discontents* 83). The belief in narrative as what Frederic Jameson calls “the central function or *instance* of the human mind” is pervasive and persistent within both popular and academic discourses of identity (emphasis his, 13). Still, there are detractors wary of the all-encompassing claims of the narrative identity thesis. For example, in an editorial for the journal *Narrative*, James Phelan considers the risks of what he calls “narrative imperialism,” that is, “the impulse by students of narrative to claim more and more territory” (206). More specifically, Phelan is uneasy with the constriction of identity that is the consequence of relying on a single story of self: “I cannot shake the awareness that whatever narrative I construct is only one of many possible narratives and that the relations among the subsets of these possibilities range from entirely compatible and mutually illuminating to entirely incompatible and mutually contradictory” (209). In this essay I propose that identity need not be mono-narratological; in fact, I argue that aging forces a confrontation with the multiplicity that Phelan posits as undermining narrative identity, a multiplicity I interpret as intrinsic to both temporal identity *and* narrative. This assertion draws on Paul Ricoeur’s vision of narrative and time as inextricably connected, the two forming, in his terms, a hermeneutic circle in which “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (*Time* 3: 3). In other

words, human temporality makes self-understanding the result of narrative, a causal relationship that becomes increasingly obvious as subjects age. As a result, in later life, time can weigh more heavily than it did during youth, provoking a confrontation with temporality, with the mutability of identities based on narrative. The proliferation of personal narratives exposes the chimerical nature of identity, rendering the subject a contested uncanny site, at once familiar and strange.<sup>1</sup> According to Freud, the space of the uncanny is marked by the collapse of boundaries, of the strange trespassing into regions of the familiar, and vice versa. Aging involves perpetual transformation that unsettles any claims to secure identity, allowing strange newness to intrude into a subject's vision of a familiar self, and undermining efforts to construct coherent life reviews.

In this essay I explore narrative-based identity theories alongside Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, a novel structured around late-life review. In *The Stone Angel*, ninety-year-old Hagar Shipley self-consciously narrates the self, confronting what Husserl calls "the paradox of human subjectivity: being a subject for the world and at the same time being an object in the world" (178). Despite her repeated attempts to manage, divide and restrict the temporal self, Hagar is gradually drawn into a space of unsettling uncanniness. She attempts to negotiate her life story by bisecting her identity into a series of polar opposites based on time and authenticity: young or old, true or false, original or deformed, insightful or blind. However, this project of control begins to falter as she becomes increasingly aware of her own mutability, an awakening to the simultaneous self/other status of the subject that moves her to recognize herself as another. Critics have noted the numerous pairings and oppositions in this canonical Canadian novel and the paradoxes they inspire. For example, Michel Fabre attends to the novel's structural and symbolic oppositions, particularly the tension between culture and nature (17), while Donna Pennee examines the paradoxical position of Hagar's incontinent body, at once excessive and restrictive (5). Those critics who discuss the novel's treatment of aging at any length, and there are fewer of such studies than one might expect, are often troubled by the novel's "bleak view of human potential" (Baum 153).<sup>2</sup> In her extended discussion of *The Stone Angel* and discourses of aging, Sally Chivers conveys her frustration at the "vexatious" novel's simultaneous "advocacy for the elderly and denigration of old age" (20). For my purposes, this contradiction and duality makes *The Stone Angel* a particularly instructive text for exploring the perils of "looking back," and the uncanny potential of aging.

The associations between later life and the evaluative backward glance are well established in both popular and academic culture, which often regard life as teleological, moving toward the telos of death, and the subject in old age as a collection of memories, a series of events that constitute the life narrative. Indeed, according to this perspective, human beings inevitably move along a recognizable trajectory: we are born, we grow, we mature, we die. For medical ethicists such as John Hardwig, the biological “facts” are clear: “We are mortal beings, and death is not only the end result of life, but its telos—the aim or purpose for which we are headed biologically” (Hardwig, qtd. in Overall 32). Within this linear program, once one enters the realm of late-life, there is little of the route left to look forward to and as a result the gaze is typically directed backward, initiating a re-examination of the past. This is the vision of old age promoted by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, whose Life Cycle model sees a person aging through eight stages, each of which involves a central conflict between harmonious and disruptive elements (what he terms the syntonic and dystonic), a conflict that must be resolved in order for one to progress to the next stage of life.<sup>3</sup> The final stage, Old Age, involves a conflict between integrity and despair. Integration, entails, in Erikson’s terms, “a sense of *coherence* and *wholeness*” (emphasis his, 65). This sense is associated with interpretive recollection since, Erikson asserts, “[looking] back over a long past . . . helps us understand our lives and the world we live in” (6).

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

The centrality of narrative to selfhood is fundamental to the burgeoning field of narrative therapy, which insists on the psychological benefits of exploring, and often revising, the stories that make up a patient's life. "Restorying" grants the subject a high degree of agency in identity formation involving

a set of stories we tell ourselves about our past, present and future. However, these stories are far from fixed, direct accounts of what happens in our lives, but products of the inveterate fictionalizing of our memory and imagination. That is, we 'story' our lives. Moreover, we *re-story* them too. In fact, restorying goes on continually within us. (Kenyon and Randall 2)

The practice of "restorying" is essential to what Gary Kenyon and William Randall term their "*therapoetic*" perspective, which regards life narrative analysis and manipulation as the means to personal "*healing*" (emphasis theirs, 1-2). Restorying "is a therapy for the sane. In it, storytelling (and storylistening) is not merely a method for solving particular problems that crop up in our lives, but has an importance and integrity all its own, as a means to personal wholeness. In this sense, it is a spiritual activity. Through it, *we become more of who we are*" (emphasis added, Kenyon and Randall 2). Even in an ostensibly flexible model of identity maintenance like restorying, the fantasy of a solid, unyielding core remains, some self prior to narrative that is able to express itself *through* narrative, unsettling the notion of an entirely narrative-based subject. The rhetoric of "becoming oneself" and the diction of "wholeness" and "healing" stress the corrective power of narrative manipulation; narrative therapy assumes some narratives are better, or at least healthier, than others.<sup>4</sup>

A belief in the therapeutic efficacy of "storying" one's life provides the basis for the practice of life review. Life review has a "multifaceted role: to aid the narrator in achieving new insight and peace of mind; to bring closure to troubling events through viewing them from a different perspective; and to restore as far as possible neglected skills or abilities" (Garland and Garland 4). A seminal article on life review by Robert Butler appearing in the journal *Psychiatry* in 1963 was largely responsible for sparking the continuing interest in the topic. And though the current understanding of the practice may not employ Butler's universalizing rhetoric—he describes life review as a "naturally occurring, universal mental process" (66)—an emphasis on the soothing power of analysis and understanding remains.<sup>5</sup> In their practitioners' guide to life review, Jeff and Christine Garland allege that "[r]eview gives direction to people's lives as they move towards a valued endpoint, along a well-trodden track marked by success stories—and failures" (35). Life review clearly

falls within the category of narrative therapy, allowing subjects to optimize their life story through recognition, revision, and even disposal.<sup>6</sup>

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

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

As much as Hagar tells her story, her story tells her. In fact, an examination of her narratives reveals that this latter transaction, Hagar's constitution via narrative, is dominant. "We are subject *to* narrative as well as being subjects *of* narrative," writes Richard Kearney (emphasis his, *On Stories* 153); however, in Hagar's case, the emphasis falls more strongly on being subject

“to” narrative since her recollections determine her identity. Yet Hagar often refuses to reflect on her own narrative, functioning more as mouthpiece than as determining agent, or interpretive author. To be sure, there are moments in the text when Hagar seems capable of becoming an interpretive agent, but these moments are fleeting and not sustained. Perhaps the most obvious example is her revelation about pride that comes as the clergyman, Mr. Troy, sings to her. In pain and near death, Hagar is moved to epiphany, momentarily recognizing the debilitating impact of pride, shame, and fear upon her life. The revelation appears in terms remarkably reminiscent of Freud’s “uncanny”: self-knowledge resides in “some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed” (292). But as always, the instant of interpretation and insight is fleeting, and Hagar returns to the rigid confines of an identity formed long ago, one “unchangeable, unregenerate” (293). There are several such moments of insight and reckoning, all of which are brief, painfully achieved, or confined within the haze of semi-consciousness, the insight dissolving as the moment passes.

These transitory interpretive moments are rare and, using the language of Ricoeur, Hagar remains largely in the realm of configuration, unable to consistently and effectively reflect on her own story, that is, to move successfully from configuration to refiguration.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Hagar rarely moves into the realm of interpretation, and as a result of her stubbornness she experiences a self-inflicted paralysis that denies change. The novel’s primary symbol, the memorial statue erected in honour of her dead mother, is markedly blind, doubly so since she is “not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight. Whoever carved her had left the eyeballs blank” (3). This central metaphor of sightlessness draws our attention to Hagar’s reluctance to see, that is, her inability to be an effective reader. Her limited insight into her own story impedes Hagar’s ascent toward redemption. She is a mouthpiece, a teller who often refuses to effectively listen or read, and as a result she is determined *by* narrative in spite of her ironic efforts to be always the determiner. Hagar is an overtly narrative subject, but one unwilling to read her own story.

“Now I am rampant with memory” (Laurence 5). This oft-cited remark occurs early in the novel, initiating Hagar’s repeated contact with narratives of the past. The phrase suggests an inversion of the recollecting, storytelling subject. In Hagar’s figuration, memory is the active agent that overtakes its subject. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us that “rampant” refers to things “Unchecked, unrestrained, aggressive . . . Having full sway or

unchecked course in the individual or (more commonly) in general society” (OED). The term’s etymology is linked to wild animals, and one denotation refers to a beast reared on its hind legs.<sup>8</sup> A rampant memory is an uncontrollable one, a wild and domineering force that demands release in the narrative: “Now I light one of my cigarettes and stump around my room, remembering *furiously*, for no reason except that I am caught up in it” (emphasis added 6). Clearly there is no space here for the calm interaction of reflections. This narrative, this remembered past, determines Hagar, a wildness of recollection that she still prefers to the boredom of the present where she is treated as a thing by “the middling ones” (6), as “a cash crop” (6), and “a calf, to be fattened” (35).

In the voicing of her life narrative, Hagar undermines the multiplicity and flexibility of mediated identity. She maintains a stiff narrative line bisected into before and after, allowing her the illusion of pinpointing the constitution of self and its subsequent perversion. For Hagar Shipley, the unfamiliarity of the self in the present is in direct contrast to the “true” self of her youth, Hagar *Currie*. Yet Hagar’s maiden name deconstructs her own nostalgic vision of a youthful, whole self. The obsolete term “currie” refers to “[t]he portions of an animal slain in the chase that were given to the hounds . . . [or] any prey thrown to the hounds to be torn in pieces” (OED). In other words, “Currie” signifies the ruin of a wild creature, suggesting that even in her youth, the patriarchal destruction of the “wild,” “wilful” feminine was already underway—“Currie” being the name passed on to Hagar through her father. Her narrative documents the undoing of that supposedly true “Currie” self that has led to the disavowed “figure” of the present, one that appears “arbitrary and impossible” (38), a pattern of dissolution Laurence emphasizes through her use of names. Hagar repeatedly locates herself in a long past moment “when I first began to remember and to notice myself” (38). This period of authentic selfhood occurred when she was Hagar Currie teetering between the domination of two patriarchs: her father and her future husband. In this brief moment of (illusory) freedom, Hagar is on the brink of marriage, giddily defying her father’s wishes and not yet burdened by the realities of her ill-conceived union to Bram Shipley. Hagar’s father refuses to condone the marriage, but Hagar is determined: “‘There’s not a decent girl in this town would wed without her family’s consent,’ he said. ‘It’s not done.’ ‘It’ll be done by me,’ I said, drunk with exhilaration at my daring” (49).<sup>9</sup> Hagar imagines wholeness and freedom in the fleeting liminal space of transition, a space of change that she transforms into a static portrait of authenticity.

So fixed is Hagar on a definitive, youthful version of selfhood that her current status is often a shock: “I glance down at myself . . . and see with surprise and unfamiliarity the great swathed hips. My waist was twenty inches” (56). The selective use of possessive pronouns betrays Hagar’s disavowal, articulating her body as other, an unfamiliar and unpleasant object at odds with the body, the self, she lays claim to: only the youthful body of the past is “my” body. Ironically, in her diligent emplotment of her life, Hagar locates herself in *images*, rejecting the temporality, the transition intrinsic to narrative. Hagar’s narrative works to deny its own temporality through its efforts to impose constancy—Hagar *is* the young, beautiful unruly girl on the brink of marriage in a first experience of self-awareness—and to deny transience—Hagar *is not* the impoverished aged woman in her husband’s overcoat selling eggs at Lottie’s backdoor. Nor is she the old woman she sees reflected in a restroom mirror: “My hair was gray and straight . . . The face—a brown and leathery face that *wasn’t mine*. Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some *truer image*, infinitely distant” (emphasis added, 133). Hagar’s observation reinforces the opposition between youth and age, truth and falsity, resulting in a denial that attempts to consign the distorted, delinquent, or aged self to the space of otherness.

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

Hagar is not alone in her insistence on temporal segregation. As Woodward makes clear, age gradations “ultimately and precipitously devolve into a single binary—into youth and age. Age is a subtle continuum, but we organize this continuum into “polar opposites” (Woodward, *Discontents* 6). Woodward identifies such evaluative segmentation as the legacy of a



psychoanalytic conception of a bodily ego formed in childhood: “The ego takes shape in infancy; the surface of the body is imagined as smooth, that is, as unwrinkled – in short, as *young*. Thus in Freudian discourse the aging body would be a sign of *deformation*” (10). Consequently, youth often becomes, as Patricia Mellencamp asserts, “a lost object rather than a process or a passage. . . . An abnormal modeling of ego or self as an object, often of contempt, rather than a subject can be the rageful result” (281). Frustration, contempt, and even rage are obvious in Hagar’s narrative; indeed, the novel opens with an epigraph from Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night.” But while Thomas is urging a dying father to rage against death, to rise up vibrant and vital, Hagar’s rage is directed both outward and inward in a flailing hatred of time and aging. Trapped as she is in a past image, her narrative is one of frustration, of “*deformation*,” since it inevitably moves her away from her beloved youth.

Unable to confront her own temporality and acknowledge strangeness *within*, she is similarly unable to empathize with the other older women patients in the hospital where she is taken after her “rescue” from Shadow Point. She is unnerved by what she can only regard as decrepitude, demanding a private room to protect her from the threat of association with these aged others. She does get her wish, but her move to a semi-private suite comes just as she is beginning to glimpse the humanity of the other patients, an awareness of their position as subjects. The revelation that Hagar has been talking in her sleep, a disclosure she immediately rejects, suggests the existence of multiple versions, of stories that her conscious mind cannot abide (259). The narrative voiced in sleep precisely embodies Schelling’s uncanny as “*everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light*” (qtd in Freud 345).<sup>10</sup> Hagar projects otherness onto the other patients, whom she regards as old, infirm nuisances, as abjectly corporeal with their “open-mouthed yawns . . . gaseous belches, volcanic wind” (258). However, this projection is undermined by the shocking discovery that she herself is *one of them* when another patient informs Hagar of her uncanny storytelling:

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

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

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

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

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

"That's what you think," she says. (Laurence 258-9)

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

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

It is a shock for Hagar to recognize her own cries among the others; indeed, "Some time elapses" before she recognizes her voice (275). Hagar's outburst appears as one fragment within an unattributed list of speech that makes her voice one of many in a chorus of sleep-talking. Hagar's recognition briefly pierces through the protective blindness that makes us "refuse to acknowledge ourselves-as-others" (Kearney, *Strangers* 5). Hagar momentarily hears herself-as-other in her uncanny utterance: she discovers a voice and a story that is her own, that is *her*, and yet is unfamiliar. Aging and her association with other aging women move Hagar into a space of uncanny recognition where the illusion of the singular, authentic self begins to dissolve into multiple versions. As philosopher Henry Venema explains in his inquiry into Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, "there is no meta-narrative that can totalize my experience. Narrative identity is an identity of various stories" (97). The unbidden voice, speaking in fragments, speaking from sleep, speaking alongside many others, divulges the cacophonous self: unstable and various, at once other and self.

But Hagar seeks to return to the meta-narrative that puts youth at the apex. Her uncanny recognition is cut short when she is whisked away to the semi-private quarters she had requested. In her new room, which she shares with a young woman hospitalized for an appendectomy, Hagar quickly returns to her exclusive identification with the "lost object" of youth: "I was quite slender at your age," she tells the thin, young nurse who ministers to her, "I had black hair, long, halfway down my back. Some people thought

me quite pretty. You'd never think so to look at me now" (283). Once again Hagar locates herself in a static memory that makes time into a process of dissolution and paradoxical inflation, since it magnifies the body's importance by "deforming" it. She shares her new room with a young woman whose youthfulness quickly inspires Hagar's empathy, unlike the old women of the public ward, who initially prompted irritation and disgust.<sup>11</sup>

Hagar quickly tumbles back into the model of an authentic self formed in youth and victimized by time.<sup>12</sup> This dualistic fantasy of constancy cannot tolerate the instability of temporal existence. In Ricoeur's formation, narrative simultaneously creates and depends upon time in a circular constitutive transaction; but Hagar's narration seeks to deny the impermanence that human narrativity and temporality bring. The novel emphasizes such a static vision of selfhood that equates time and change primarily with debilitation in its framing image of the stone angel; in her full (though blind) glory at the outset, she is altered by time at the novel's end: "she stood askew and tilted. Her mouth was white. We didn't touch her. We only looked. Someday she'll topple entirely, and no one will bother to set her upright again" (305). Original integrity is set against the collapsed future, the metonymic angel neatly bracketing Hagar's narrative of her own fall.

However, though the novel does employ these stone angel images as a frame, the weather-beaten angel does not close the novel. The novel's actual ending, two pages later, gives temporality the final word. The final lines, like the sleep-talking scene, rupture the neatness of the singular self, the simple bisection of Hagar's life into before and after. Hagar's narrative is aborted by mortality and the novel's concluding fragment, "And then—" (308), represents a simultaneous suspension and triumph of time. This artificial maintenance of the present, through which the reader is always here, on the verge, unable to move to the next moment, creates an ending that flaunts closure. As a result, the novel, and by extension, Hagar, can be always *on the verge of* and concluded at once. The uncanniness that Hagar refused to accept subsequently finds her at her death in this fragment, this simultaneous presence and absence, this unfinished completion.

*The Stone Angel* suggests that "life review" is never comprehensive or fully finished since summation and exhaustive analysis are invariably thwarted by the progress of time. Though narrative can provide the comfort of meaning and identity, its temporal nature (narrative as the human way of understanding and expressing time) means that it is always fluid, open to revision and re-telling. Or, as Ricoeur explains, narrative is "not a stable and

seamless identity,” making it “the name of the problem at least as much as it is that of a solution” (*Time* 3: 248, 249); narrative identity is always in flux as it “continues to make and unmake itself” (249). Though mutability is an unavoidable effect of temporality, as Hagar and the various champions of life review demonstrate, we transient mortals continue to long for the “stable and seamless identity” of totalizing stories, for corrective metanarratives able to encapsulate a life. Consequently, as *The Stone Angel* dramatizes, change can easily become a frightful spectre that threatens to upset the illusion of a fixed, authentic self. The prospect of multiple versions of self introduced by aging can provoke a frightening unsteadiness as distinctions and categories begin to blur, as oppositions refuse to hold. Life narratives are multiple and complex, rampant with ambiguities and contradictions, with interpretive blindspots, frustrating ellipses. As the *The Stone Angel* suggests, “looking back” rarely, if ever, yields a cohesive meta-narrative of self in spite of the recollecting subject’s desire to do so. Instead, the reading and writing of a life in Laurence’s novel exposes the very mutability at the heart of narrative itself, wedded as it is to ever-changing temporality. To look back is to gaze at a chimerica, at the uncanniness of self.

## NOTES

- 1 The converse is also true: the increased prevalence of dementia in later life means that aging can result in the gradual disappearance of narratives, and by implication, an erosion of the subject, one that produces a frightening uncanniness as subjects become strangers to themselves and those around them. The uncanniness of later-life dementia is the subject of my current research into relations between caregivers and those they care for.
- 2 One of the few essays that analyzes the novel’s “affirmation” of old age is Constance Rooke’s “Old Age in Contemporary Fiction: A New Paradigm of Hope” (250). Rooke also uses Laurence’s novel to touch briefly on the “theme” of “life review,” which she sees as central to the genre she terms “*Vollendungsroman*,” the novel of winding up and completion (244-5).
- 3 Erikson’s eight stages, their central conflicts and ideal resolutions are as follows:  
 Stage one: Infancy. Basic trust versus mistrust resolving in hope.  
 Stage two: Early childhood. Autonomy versus shame resolving in will.  
 Stage three: Play age. Initiative versus guilt resolving in purpose.  
 Stage four: School age. Industry versus inferiority resolving in competence.  
 Stage five: Adolescence. Identity versus identity confusion resolving in fidelity.  
 Stage six: Young adulthood. Intimacy versus isolation resolving in love.  
 Stage seven: Adulthood. Generativity versus stagnation resolving in care.  
 Stage eight: Old age. Integrity versus despair, disgust resolving in wisdom.
- 4 The therapeutic preference for certain narratives as more appropriate for psychological healing is, of course, part of the legacy of the psychoanalytic “talking cure,” which “meets

psychological pain with narrative” (Hemmings 109). In psychoanalysis, narrative can become the anodyne as “healthy” stories are made to replace dysfunctional ones. For more on the narrative implications of psychoanalysis, see Steven Marcus and Donald Spence.

- 5 Kathleen Woodward takes issue with life review theory, which she regards as limiting in its emphasis on the location, or creation, of consistent, coherent life narratives (“Telling Stories” 150). Instead of life review, she prefers the more open-ended process of “reminiscence,” which “does not promise the totality of the life review. It is more fragmentary and partial. Reminiscence is concerned with a certain moment, or moments, in the past” (“Telling Stories” 151). She regards reminiscence as “generative and restorative,” as less analytical and restrictive than life review (151). In these terms, reminiscence makes room for multiplicity and mutability, the flux of narrative identity. Literary gerontologist Anne Wyatt-Brown disagrees with Woodward’s analysis, arguing that “real lives, unlike postmodern novels, have their psychic coherence. They can display all the Aristotelian characteristics of a beginning, middle, and end” (341). I do not dispute that “real” lives have some “Aristotelian” coherence, but I would argue that such neat linear narratives are rarely the whole story. As *The Stone Angel* makes clear, even organized, coherent life narratives are open to revision and reinterpretation.
- 6 Life review often has “three stages: focusing on what has been learned about self in relation to others; considering whether this learning is still relevant; and recognising what should be retained, revising what is unclear, and discarding what is no longer required” (Garland and Garland 3).
- 7 These terms stem from Ricoeur’s treatment in *Time and Narrative* of the three stages of mimesis that produce the hermeneutic circle between narrative and life (2: 64-71). Ricoeur proposes emplotment, or configuration, as the connective tissue between the preconfigured world and our understanding of it. And it is this understanding, or reconfiguration that, in turn, informs our action and participation in the world. As Ricoeur explains, this third stage of mimesis “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader” (2: 71).
- 8 Sally Chivers’s analysis of *The Stone Angel* emphasizes the preponderance of animal metaphors and similes in the novel, suggesting that such “bestial and derogatory” vehicles are an effect of the collision between memories of youth and the fearful difficulties of old age. She suggests that such figurative language effects a distancing from the present, from old age since Hagar can only reach the present through derogatory and evasive metaphor, producing a “tenor [that] continually shifts and evades readers” (30).
- 9 Notably, it is during this liminal moment between men that Hagar’s father seems to briefly acknowledge her subject status, calling his daughter by her name:

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

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

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

- 10 This particular secret, sleep-talking, both unveils and maintains Hagar’s incomprehensibility, an element of strangeness that can never be entirely domesticated: the uncanny unearthing of dark secrets is always only a partial exposure. An element of irreducible otherness must always remain. This is part of the very uncanniness of Freud’s “The

- Uncanny,” an essay that demonstrates the necessary limits to explanation since exhaustive explanation would in effect eradicate the very phenomenon it seeks to explore. In other words, the uncanny and Freud’s investigation of it, take us to the limits of representation since the term by definition relies upon a degree of semantic and interpretive uncertainty.
- 11 Despite the fact that her roommate, Sandra Wong, is a young Chinese-Canadian woman, Hagar more easily identifies with her than with her contemporaries in the previous ward. Here we see evidence of Woodward’s claim that “in advanced old age, age may assume more importance than any of the other differences which distinguish our bodies from others” (*Discontents* 16). Hagar easily overlooks ethnicity in order to identify with youth.
- 12 Aging studies includes a number of identity theories that concur with Hagar’s vision. Joseph Esposito, for example, “divide[s] the lifespan into just two stages: the emergence of the ultimate self and the maintenance of the ultimate self” (101). However, I maintain that old age frequently strains the illusion of permanence provided by such theories.

WORKS CITED

- Abbott, Porter. “The Future of all Narrative Futures.” *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Ed. James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 529-541.
- Baum, Rosalie Murphy. “Self-Alienation of the Elderly in Margaret Laurence’s Fiction.” *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism*. Ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996. 153-160.
- Bell, Alice. “Hagar Shipley’s Rage for Life: Narrative Technique in *The Stone Angel*.” *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism*. Ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996. 51-62.
- Butler, Robert. “The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged.” *Psychiatry* 26 (1963): 65-76.
- Chivers, Sally. *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women’s Narratives*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2003.
- Erikson, Erik H. *The Life Cycle Completed*. Ed. Joan M. Erikson. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.
- Fabre, Michel, Marie Bell-Salter, and Raymonde Neil. “The Angel and the Living Water: Metaphorical Networks and Structural Opposition in *The Stone Angel*.” *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism*. Ed. Greta M. K. McCormick Coger. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996. 17-28.
- Freud, Sigmund. “The ‘Uncanny.’” *Art and Literature*. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. James Strachey and Angela Richards. London: Penguin, 1985. 335-376.
- Garland, Jeff, and Christina Garland. *Life Review in Health and Social Care: A Practitioner’s Guide*. Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2001.
- Hemmings, Robert. “‘The Blameless Physician’: Narrative and Pain, Sassoon and Rivers.” *Literature and Medicine* 24.1 (2005): 109-26.
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1970.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Kearney, Richard. *On Stories*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- . *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Ideas of Otherness*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

- Kenyon, Gary M., and William Lowell Randall. *Restoring our Lives: Personal Growth Through Autobiographical Reflection*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997.
- Krystal, Henry. "Trauma and Aging: A Thirty-Year Follow-Up." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995. 76-99.
- Laurence, Margaret. *The Stone Angel*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988.
- Marcus, Steven. "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History." *In Dora's Case*. Ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. 56-91.
- Mellencamp, Patricia. *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age and Comedy*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992.
- Overall, Christine. *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.
- Pennee, Donna Palmateer. "Technologies of Identity: The Language of the Incontinent Body in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Littérature Canadienne* 25.2 (2000): 1-23.
- Phelan, James. "Who's Here? Thoughts on Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism." *Narrative* 13.3 (2005): 205-10.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. 3 vols. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.
- Rooke, Constance. "Old Age in Contemporary Fiction: A New Paradigm of Hope." *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*. Eds. Thomas R. Cole, David D. Van Tassel, and Robert Kastenbaum. New York: Springer, 1992. 241-57.
- Spence, Donald P. *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1982.
- Venema, Henry Isaac. *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2000.
- Woodward, Kathleen. *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- . "Telling Stories: Aging, Reminiscence, and the Life Review." *Journal of Aging and Identity* 2.3 (1997): 149-63.
- Wyatt-Brown, Anne M. "Literary Gerontology Comes of Age." *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*. Eds. Thomas R. Cole, David D. Van Tassel, and Robert Kastenbaum. New York: Springer, 1992. 331-51.

