

INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY:
SEMIOLOGIES OF AGEING AND THE LINEAMENTS OF
ETERNITY IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY PROSE

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my own work. It has not been submitted for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Lucy Anne Perry

April 2012.

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LP

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of the semiologies of age in modern and contemporary prose. The chapters that follow emerge from my continuing interest in how anti-senescence medicine, gerontophobia, and the commodification of immortality in discourses of consumerism have impacted literary representations of time, organic decay, and the meaning of death. Each chapter deals in different ways with the question of how to represent mortality in the context of a culture incredulous of ageing and the laws of nature, and a populace seeking to aestheticise, medicalise, and verbalise its way out of the ageing process. Paradoxical though it is, I argue that Anglo-American culture's jejune and oneiric fantasies of immortality, rejuvenation, and perpetual youth are not located in science fiction, mythos, extropian philosophy, or trans-/posthumanist discourse, but in the literature of ageing and the very spectacle of decay. The contemporary literature of ageing offers a clear thematic preoccupation with the pathos of mortality and senility. However, at the same time, the conventional or canonical indices of decay and decline are replete with counterrealist inflections and semiotic echoes of immortality. From the prose and dramaturgy of Samuel Beckett to post-2000 Alzheimer's fiction, the literature of ageing, I argue, transforms the depreciation of old age readily into its ideality, and makes the reader cognisant of the realities in which we, as members of a culture at once ageing demographically and anti-ageing ideologically, currently operate.

INTRODUCTION: A GENEALOGY OF ANTI-AGEING

‘Oh that there were a medicine curing age...’¹

Regimen of Health of Salerno (eleventh century)

This thesis examines how western discourses of ageing have impacted on representations of time, organic decay, and the meaning of death in contemporary Anglophone literature. In each of its four chapters I address the question of whether there can be a stable semiology of ageing in the context of a culture incredulous of mortality and the laws of nature, habituated to anti-ageing ideologies, and expectant of their reification. I will examine the ways in which literature, from the works of Samuel Beckett to post-2000 Alzheimer’s fiction, has responded to or been affected by developments in geriatric and prolongevity medicine; gerontophobia and age prejudice; demographic change² and ‘uncharted territory in which we find ourselves both as aging individuals and as an aging nation;’³ and the blandishments, sophistry, and cultural saliency of anti-ageing. Paradoxically, humanity has never been more familiar with immortality than in the era where medical and scientific capability render unavoidable, and even extend, the period of life that most inescapably reminds us of our *mortality*: old age. Put simply, it is the success of an *anti-ageing* culture that gives rise to an *ageing* one. As Mike Hepworth notes, ‘ours is probably the most age-conscious period in human history,’⁴ but it is one defined also by its wilful and adroit repression of the realities of age, by the jejune attempts to aestheticise one’s way out of ageing, and by humanity’s libidinal fear of death – as exemplified in the ideological imperialism of anti-ageing.

¹Cited by Harold Maxwell et al., *A History of Medicine* (USA: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1947), p. 313.

² The UK Actuary’s Department predicts that the ‘UK population over 100 years of age will increase 100-fold from 10,000 now to 1 million in 2074’. Guy Brown, *The Living End: The Future of Death, Aging, and Immortality* (London & New York: Macmillan, 2008), p. 4.

³ Sharon R. Kaufman, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 4.

⁴ Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 3.

At once ageing and anti-ageing, western culture today is placing antithetical and incompatible demands on literature –is challenging ‘the very language used to articulate the ageing process.’⁵ The ageing-literature nexus is frequently, if circumspectly, evoked as postmodern consumer culture demands that people be increasingly cognisant of the *signs of ageing*. The noun ‘signs’ has both aesthetic and semiotic connotations, and with this *double entendre* in mind, what this thesis will examine are the ways in which the conventional or canonical signs, or signifiers, of age hold less and less credence representationally –and are called upon to change –as people become increasingly adept at aestheticising and medicalising their way out of the *physical* signs of ageing. However, far from being a uniquely modern preoccupation, ‘anti-ageing’ has evolved over centuries, dominating medical epistemologies, from the ancient Egyptian papyri; the ancient values of morality, good diet, cleanliness, hygiene, and sobriety and temperate habits; the medicalisation of old age from Galenic humoral nosologies to Baconian-scientific theories; the Romanticised ideas about the perfectibility of the body in post-medieval writing; the blossoming of dietary, pharmaceutical, and biomedical theories from the eighteenth century; the institutional solution to old age in the mid-nineteenth century with the formation of geriatrics; examination on the pathological features of senescence in Emil Kraepelin and Alois Alzheimer’s histological research on brain atrophy; the flourishing of prolongevity, or anti-senescence, medicine in the twentieth century with ‘developments in biotechnological interventions, bioengineered or robotic solutions, [and] applications classified more as cosmetic care and mental training;’⁶ and finally, and more banally, the commodification of immortality in discourses of consumerism. This humanist fallacy, anti-ageing, has formed the basis of a consistent and evolving programme of meliorism, and has in recent decades

⁵ Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 66.

⁶ Astrid Stuckelberger, *Anti-Ageing Medicine: Myths and Chances* (Hochschulverlag AD an der ETH Zurich, Switzerland, 2008), p. xiii.

become more prevalent with rising life expectancies and demographic change. Although science and medicine have progressed significantly in recent decades, ideologically ‘anti-ageing’ today, in both medicine and postmodern consumerism, differs little from its early, noninterventionist scientific roots. What I want to do in this introduction is explore some of the cultural and medical antecedents of anti-ageing. I shall examine the extent to which the rich genealogy of anti-ageist thought has left the possibility of clear, uncontested definition of old age elusive, if not impossible; and how the cultural antinomies in which the subject of ageing is besieged has impacted the literature and language of ageing over the past six decades.

i) Historicising Anti-ageing: Medical and Cultural Antecedents

Although geriatrics only really came into existence after the mid-nineteenth century⁷ and gerontology as late as 1945,⁸ clinical inquiry into ageing and its attendant ills has persisted for centuries. Anti-ageing is neither a new nor particularly contentious ideology. The ‘attempts to hide, postpone or relieve the effects of biological ageing [...] are not necessarily either modern or scientific in origin but are frequently presented as such.’⁹ Anti-ageing is a cultural artefact that has persisted for generations; it is an intellectual edifice that has evolved and been shaped by religious doctrine, changing medical and scientific nosologies, and prevailing cultural norms for generations. In recent decades anti-ageing has grown into the panacea to rising life expectancies and demographic change –the gerontopia, that is, forged unwittingly and inopportunely through medical achievements of the last century. As life expectancies have risen, anti-ageing seems to have grown into a new form of humanism and

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. By Patrick O’Brian (London & New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 21.

⁸ Thomas R. Cole et al., ‘Humanistic Gerontology and the Meaning(s) of Aging’ in *Gerontology: Perspectives and Issues*, 3rd edn., ed. by Janet Wilmoth et al. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2007), p. 245.

⁹ John Vincent, ‘Anti-Ageing Science and the Future of Old Age’ in *The Futures of Old Age*, ed. by Chris R. Phillipson et al. (London: Sage, 2006), pp. 192-201 (p. 196).

healthcare paradigm. It is an ideology that has gained greater credence with advances in prolonevity medicine and bio-gerontological research, yet it is also one articulated in more oneiric or fanciful terms in postmodern consumer culture. Consumer capitalism has arguably de-sensationalised more conventionally science fictional, occult, or philosophical notions of immortality, and has secularised the premise of victory over death –reincarnation, transmigration, resurrection, and immortality –that underpins many monotheistic religions. However, sempiternity and rejuvenation (or reversing age) are immemorial desires. They have dominated medical epistemologies and practice for centuries, and have such cultural antecedents as: the Greek myth of Tithonus, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 1440 BC); the Epicurean gods who were immortal yet material beings; Iolas in *The Children of Herakles* (430BC) by Euripides (c. 480-406 BC), who is rejuvenated prior to battle, which is described as a ‘magical negation of old age itself;’¹⁰ Aristophanic comedy, which often includes elderly characters who ‘rejuvenate themselves (and thus by definition cease to be old men);’¹¹ the themes of transformation and rejuvenation in Ovid’s (43 BC- AD 17/8) *Metamorphoses* (8AD); the Peter Pan fallacy; the immortal Struldbruggs in Jonathan Swift’s (1667-1745) *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726); and Oscar Wilde’s (1854-1900) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

Rejuvenation has dominated the literary imagination, from the earliest known work of literature –the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* –to contemporary science-fictional utopias. However, it is as rife in medicine, and is perhaps one subject that has united literature and medicine more so than any other. ‘At a very early stage in his evolution prehistoric man must have sought a solution for the age-long problem of death,’¹² and with time religious

¹⁰ Thomas Van Nortwick, *Imagining Men: Ideals of Masculinity in Ancient Greek Culture* (USA: Praeger Publishers, 2008), p.143.

¹¹ Thomas K. Hubbard, ‘Old Men in the Youthful Plays of Aristophanes’ in *Old Age in Greek and Roman Literature*, ed. by Thomas M. Falkner & Judith De Luce (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 90-114 (p. 91).

¹² Douglas Guthrie, *A History of Medicine* (Toronto & New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1946), p. 3.

configurations of immortality passed into scientific interest,¹³ and ideas of rejuvenation and immortality gradually departed from some of their religious,¹⁴ mythical, and folkloric roots and came to dominate medical and scientific epistemologies –spreading, in more recent decades, to the more quotidian realm of consumer capitalism. Today, anti-ageing is defined as ‘a therapy that reduces the amount of a life span-limiting pathology, either by slowing its development over time (senescence-slowng therapy) or by repairing it (senescence-remediation therapy).’¹⁵ However, anti-ageing has been a consistent and evolving form of humanism over the course of medical history. Susannah Ottaway comments on how ‘[i]deals about how to counter the symptoms and discomfort of old age, and to actually extend the life course, were a consistent preoccupation from the classical and biblical worlds into the modern day.’¹⁶ In China, Taoism sought physical immortality through the domination of harmony with natural forces, whilst alchemists made improvements in metallurgy and dyes with the goal of life extension. The goal of human life extension has comprised relatively otherworldly remedies, and we see how the Gnostic imagination merges with the medical pretension to intervene in and cure or defer the effects of age, with remedies including:

alchemy, the use of precious metals [...] that have been transmuted from baser binerals; ‘shunamatism’ or ‘gerocomy’ (cavorting with young girls); grafts (or injected extracts) from the testicles, ovaries, or glands of various animal species; cell injections from tissues of newborn or fetal animals; consumption of elixirs, ointments, drugs, hormones, dietary supplements, and specific foods; cryonics; and rejuvenation

¹³ Thomas J. Moody, *The History and Politics of Life Extension: Live Forever or Die Trying* (USA: Xlibris Corporation, 2011), p. 49.

¹⁴ In the bible it was the eating of the forbidden fruit that ‘brought death into the world, and all our woe’ (Romans 5:12), without which immortality is the natural state of Man.

¹⁵ Preston W. Estep III, ‘The promise of Human Life Span Extension’ in *Biopsychosocial Approaches to Longevity: Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, vol. 27 (2007), ed. by Leonard W. Poon et al. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008), p. 32

¹⁶ Susannah Ottaway, ‘Medicine and Old Age’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine*, ed. by Mark Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 338-355 (p. 347).

from devices and exposure to various substances such as mineral and thermal springs.¹⁷

As well as being a theme in the earliest known literary text, rejuvenation/immortality is also a feature of the earliest known medical text, the Ebers Papyrus (c. 1600 BC). The ancient Egyptian papyri contain a collection of remedies for various ailments, including age-associated characteristics such as the thinning and greying of hair. The Ebers papyrus includes several sections ‘devoted to stemming the ravages of age,’ with ‘remedies to prevent the hair turning grey’ and ‘remedies to be applied for transforming an old man into a youth.’¹⁸ Ancient Egyptians were not only highly conscious of the unfavourable consequences of age but sought ‘to find ways to retain their faculties in old age’ and, like consumer culture today, *aestheticise* their way out of age. Several sections of the papyri offer ‘a variety of cosmetic preparations designed to “transform the skin,” “to open up the outer flesh,” to stretch the face,” [and] to drive away wrinkles from the face.”’¹⁹ Similarly, in ancient Rome, old age was perceived as sexually unattractive and ugliness and deformity formed the basis of much irreverent Roman humour on the subject. As Karen Cokayne highlights, examples can be found of:

attempts to cover up the physical ravages of old age by the use of cosmetics or other “tricks” in order to retain a youthful appearance, as old men were said to dye or to pluck out their grey hair and cover up their baldness by wigs.²⁰

¹⁷ Robert H. Binstock and Jennifer R. Fishman, ‘Social Dimensions of Anti-ageing Science and Medicine’ in *The Sage Handbook of Social Gerontology*, ed. by Daniel Dannefer and Chris Phillipson (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2010), p. 472.

¹⁸ John F. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), p. 95.

¹⁹ Bruno Halioua & Bernard Ziskind, ‘From Cradle to Grave: Old Age and Deformities’ in *Medicine in the Days of the Pharaohs*, trans. by M.B DeBevois (USA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 69-95 (pp. 95-7).

²⁰ Karen Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 16.

Classical Greek and Roman medical literature on age form an interesting body of proto-scientific thought on the biology of ageing, and collectively conceptualise ageing as a state to be prevented. Seneca's axiom *senectus morbidus est*, or 'old age is a disease'²¹ is a clear summation of the perception of ageing at the time and the nosological picture of age that was gaining momentum from this time. In *On the Soul*, a treatise on the nature and functioning of the human soul, Aristotle explains how '[t]he incapacity in old age is due to an affection not of the soul but of its vehicle, as occurs in drunkenness or disease.'²² In the Hippocratic corpus, ageing was perceived as an illness relating to a gradual process of cooling. It was believed that at birth an individual received a certain amount heat or vital spirit which, over the years, would diminish. Whilst this heat necessary to life could be replenished through eating, drinking and breathing, it could never be fully restored, and thus the diminishment of the body's heat resulted in the weaknesses attributed to age.²³ The cooling of the body, which brought about an imbalance of the humours (blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm), weakened the body and ageing would occur. It is this pathology of the humours that old age was attributed to, and 'by implication,' Karen Cokayne writes, 'old age would therefore be classified as an illness.'²⁴ In Aristotle's opinion:

...the word for "old age", *gêras*, was etymologically related to the word for "earth", *gê*, and old age was thought to have the cold and dry qualities of earth. An "illness", such as grey hair, was considered the result of a lack of warmth, something

²¹ (Seneca) Multiple Contributors, *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, ed. by Malcolm L. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 22.

²² Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. by J. A. Smith (USA: Kessinger Publishing), p. 15.

²³ Robert Kastenbaum, 'Scientific Legacy of Antiquity' in *Encyclopaedia of Adult Development* (Arizona: Oryx Press, 1993), p. 121.

²⁴ Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome*, p. 35.

characteristic of old age. If it were possible to restore the health and strength of the person, a change would occur, i.e. the old person would regain his youth.²⁵

For Galen, old age was a ‘state between health and illness,’²⁶ and although his works, like his contemporaries, offer classificatory system and remedies to help arrest or meliorate the ageing process, they remain relatively conservative: he ‘limited himself to cautious hygienic measures designed to moderate, but not basically to alter, the inexorable development of the constitutional imbalance of old age.’²⁷ His work contributes significantly to medical discourse on the subject of ageing, and later in the eighteenth century, Gerard Van Swieten (1700-72) – a proponent of Galen – echoed aspects of Galenic humouralism, proposing age as an incurable disease.

From the Middle Ages prolongevity and romanticised ideas about the perfectibility of the body began to flourish in medicine and science. The Etruscans were using false teeth obtained from deceased children and animals, and Roger Bacon (1214-94), notable for his works on old age and preventive hygiene, became the first to suggest using lenses to correct poor sight.²⁸ The desire to palliate or defer some of the undesirable consequences of age are examined by Bacon in his book *The Cure of Old Age, and Preservation of Youth* (trans. 1683) in which he examines the ‘causes of Old Age [and] the Remedies which hinder them, and after what manner they may be hindered.’²⁹ Commenting on the unfavourable consequences of age, he examines ‘by what ways these Faculties may be recreated, and being weak may be

²⁵ Daniel Schäfer, “That Senescence itself is an Illness”: A Transitional Medical Concept of Age and Ageing in the Eighteenth Century’, *Medical History* (2002), vol. 48, pp. 525-548 (528).

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1044563/pdf/medhist00005-0071.pdf> [accessed 12/11/11].

²⁶ Rasma Lazda-Cazers, *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*, ed. by Albrecht Classen (Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), p. 206.

²⁷ Klaus Warner Schaie, ‘The History of Geropsychology’ in *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging*, ed. by James E. Birren & K. Warner Schaie, 5th edn. (London: Academic Press, 2001), p. 9.

²⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 19.

²⁹ Roger Bacon, *The Cure of Old Age, and Preservation of Youth* (London: Publisher Unknown, 1683), p. 11.

strengthened.’³⁰ One of the oldest monographs on the pathologies of age, *Gerontocomia* (1489) by Gabriele Zerbi (1445-1505), discusses ‘old age as a disposition beyond nature,’ as ‘a form of illness which proceeds from the necessity of nature.’ He describes how, although death is inevitable, it may be postponed: ‘death follows old age nor can an old man return to those earlier ages by any means whatsoever although the rate of its approach can somehow be retarded.’³¹ Also at this time Arnald of Villanova (1235-1311) writes *Defense of Age and Recovery of Youth* (1540), and in *Libellus* (1542), Bacon writes on:

the causes of old age, its remedies, chief phenomena, wrinkles and other signs, debility of the senses, the food and drink appropriate for the aged, [...] the means of retarding old age and preserving strength, the care of the skin, and finally some medicines and a regimen for reviving the imagination, reason, and memory.³²

In a similar vein Paracelsus (1493-1541) regarded alchemy as ‘important for the curing of diseases and the prolongation of life [...] of perfecting what Nature had left in an imperfect state.’³³ Many aspects of Paracelsean medicine and medical philosophy are geared towards the prolongation of life through the understanding and categorisation of disease. It demonstrates a clear empiricism and clinical objectivity akin to what Michel Foucault later termed the ‘medical gaze.’³⁴ In a preface to *The Diseases that Deprive Man of his Reason* (1567) Paracelsus writes:

In nature there are not only diseases which afflict our body and our health, but many others which deprive us of sound reason, and these are the most serious. While speaking about the natural diseases and observing to what extent and how seriously

³⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

³¹ Gabriele Zerbi, *Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged and Maximianus, Elegies on Old Age and Love*, trans. by L. R. Lind (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988), p. 76-7.

³² L. R. Lind, *Gerontocomia*, p. 5.

³³ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, ‘The Philosophy, Medicine, and Theology of Paracelsus’ in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, trans. by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (Great Britain: Crucible, 1999), p. 33.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), p. 9.

they afflict various parts of our body, we must not forget to explain the origin of the diseases which deprive man of reason.³⁵

Whilst earlier medical paradigms, such as those of Hippocrates, saw Time –specifically bodily time –as predetermined, Paracelsus strove ‘to eliminate the causes of disease by active interference: “[h]e should act against time. For physic has to overcome time.”³⁶ For Paracelsus, biological age is made malleable by clinical rationalism and deduction –by *human* intervention. From this time, ‘[k]nowledge of germs and improved surgical techniques transformed early twentieth-century medical view of the human body and greatly enhanced the possibilities for intervening against disease and senescence.’³⁷ However, as suggested by texts such as *The Art of Living Long* (1550) by the Venetian nobleman Louis Cornaro (1417-1566), the medicalisation of old age was met by ideas of self-intervention or self-help. The prolongevity advocate Cornaro postulates temperance and extreme moderation as the key to a long life, and argues that ‘Nature does not deny us the power of living many years’³⁸ but is determined by each individual, and that there is no inherent reason old age should result in, or be associated with, infirmity.

In post-medieval philosophical, religious, and medical thought, romanticised ideas about the perfectibility of the body and the ability to control the human life span flourished. Francis Bacon’s (1561-1626) *History Natural and Experimental of Life and Death or Of the Prolongation of Life* (1623) and Richard Allestree’s (1619-1681) *A Discourse Concerning the Period of Human Life: Whether Mutable or Immutable* (1677) clearly demonstrate that seventeenth-century culture was still preoccupied with ideas of arresting or deferring old age.

³⁵ Paracelsus, *Four Treatises*, trans. by C. Lilian Temkin et al., ed. by Henry E. Sigerist (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 142.

³⁶ Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance* (Basel & New York: S. Karger, 1958), p. 76.

³⁷ Susannah Ottaway, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine*, p. 349.

³⁸ Louis Cornaro, *The Art of Living Long*, trans. by William F. Butler (New York: Springer Publishing Company Inc., 2005), p. 7.

The movement from proverbial, moralistic, and Gnostic literature to medical and scientific enquiry –and with it religious or biblical prolongevity³⁹ to medical prolongevity –was perhaps most pronounced from the eighteenth century onwards with more materialist reasoning of iatrophysics (the medical application of physics, explaining physiological phenomena in mechanical terms) and the bourgeois support of rationalism and mechanicalism in the study of the body.⁴⁰ The study of old age advanced considerably during this time as medicine advanced empirically, and old age was ‘more sharply defined in pathological terms as details of the body’s deteriorating systems were revealed through post-mortem research.’⁴¹ Physician and proto-psychologist George Cheyne (1671-1743) wrote *An Essay on Health and Long Life* (1725) and Sir John Floyer (1649-1734) wrote the influential *Medicina Gerocomica* (1724), which sought a scientific explanation to senescence and provided ideas, mainly pertaining to diet and sobriety, as to how old age might be arrested:

Luxury, Slothfulness, dull and weaken the Body, but Labour and Temperance strengthen it, and prolong the Youth [...] Envy, Ambition, Covetousness, Anger, do decay the body; but Hope, Love, Joy, are Prolongers of our Lives by their Influence on the Humours. It is necessary to conquer the vitious Passions which attend old Age.⁴²

Harcouet de Longeville (c. 1660-1720), in *Long Livers: A Curious History of Such Persons of Both Sexes who have Liv'd Several AGES, and Grown Young Again: With the rare SECRET*

³⁹ There are many instances of religious prolongevity, including: (Christianity) Saint Servatius, bishop of Tongeren, who was alleged to have lived 375 years; Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite, 117/118 years; Welsh bard Llywarch Hen, 150 years; Saint Kevin of Glendalough (120 years); the *Maharishi of Kailas* (over 300 years); (biblical longevity) Methuselah (969 years), Jared (962 years), Noah (950 years), Eve (940 years), Adam (930 years), Seth (912 years), Kenan (910 years), Enos (905 years), Mahalalel (895 years), Lamech (777 years), Shem (600 years), Eber (464 years) etc.; (Hinduism) Devraha Baba (over 700 years); The sadhaka Loknath Brahmachari (159/60 years); Hindu saint Swami Govindanath Bharati (137 years); (Roman empire) Tiresias (over 600 years); Epimenides of Crete (nearly 300 years)

⁴⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 20.

⁴¹ Sally Palmer Thomason, *The Living Spirit of the Crone: Turning Aging Inside Out* (USA: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 65.

⁴² John Floyer, *Medicina Gerocomica: Or the Galenic Art of Preserving Old Men's Healths* (USA: Arno Press Inc., 1979), pp. 6 & 21.

of *Rejuvenency of Arnoldus of Villa Nova, And a Great Many Approv'd and Invaluable Rules to Prolong Life* (1722), writes of Man's frustrated desire for immortality:

He has Apprehensions of losing his Life as soon as he begins to be. He desires to perpetuate his Days without comprehending how few they are: and despairing to bring this about himself, he tries at least to immortalize his Name by his famous Actions. Thus Men desire Children, to live again in future Times by their Posterity; Learned Men write to delude Oblivion by the Reputation of their Works; Princes build Palaces and Cities to make themselves for their Magnificence famous after Death; and Conquerors make the World desolate, to establish to themselves Renown, surrounded with horrid Slaughter, and Seas of Blood.⁴³

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, John Hill (1716-1775) extends the earlier theories of preventive hygiene in his book *The Old Man's Guide to Health and Longer Life: With Rules for Diet, Exercise, and Physick* (1764). He comments on how:

Old mens diseases are hard to cure; but easy to prevent [...] Moderate diet and due exercise are the best guardians of health in all: but in the advanced period here considered there are two great preservatives besides; these are Ease and Cheerfulness.⁴⁴

In a similar vein in *The Virtues of Sage, in Lengthening Human Life With Rules to Attain Old Age in Health and Cheerfulness* (1765), Hill comments again that:

If there can be any thing that can prolong human life, it is our interest, and our duty to apply it [...] There is no absurdity in the opinion, that life may be prolonged. We can

⁴³ Harcouet de Longeville, *Long Livers: A Curious History of Such Persons of Both Sexes who have Liv'd Several AGES, and Grown Young Again: With the rare SECRET of Rejuvenency of Arnoldus of Villa Nova, And a Great Many Approv'd and Invaluable Rules to Prolong Life* (London: Publisher Unknown, 1722), pp. 7-8.

⁴⁴ John Hill, *The Old Man's Guide to Health and Longer Life: With Rules for Diet, Exercise, and Physick*, 5th edn. (London: Publisher Unknown, 1764), p. 4.

see it can be shortened by imprudent courses; and it is just to infer a better regulated conduct may extend it.⁴⁵

This is followed by *The Art of Prolonging Life* (1797) by German physician Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland (1762-1836), which offers a sustained, scientific examination of the human life course and physiology in relation that found in the animal kingdom. It is proposed that Man has within him the necessary conditions requisite to live through and surpass old age, and we see in Hufeland's text the spirit of transition and continued medico-philosophical inquiry on the subject of age and longevity:

Various are the methods and plans which have been proposed for the prolongation of life. The old superstitious, astrological, and fantastic methods we have already examined and appreciated; but there are others, more modern, which appear to be founded on juster principles of life and vital duration, and which deserve some inquiry before we proceed to establish that which alone is possible.⁴⁶

However, perhaps the starkest enquiry into medical/scientific progressivism in relation to human longevity is articulated by French Enlightenment thinker Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat (1743-1794):

Would it be so absurd now to suppose that the improvement of the human race should be regarded as capable of unlimited progress? That a time will come when death would result only from extraordinary accidents or the more and more gradual wearing out of vitality, and that, finally, the duration of the average interval between birth and

⁴⁵ John Hill, *The Virtues of Sage, in Lengthening Human Life With Rules to Attain Old Age in Health and Cheerfulness*, 4th edn. (London: Publisher Unknown, 1765), pp. 4-5.

⁴⁶ Christoph William Hufeland, *The Art of Prolonging Life* (USA: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), p. 137.

wearing out has itself no specific limit whatsoever?...cannot the span constantly increase...?⁴⁷

As Sussanah Ottaway remarks, '[w]hile the hope for eternal youth is eternal, the methods for achieving it map onto the medical expertise and mentalities of each era.'⁴⁸ With empirical advances in medicine as more post-mortems are conducted, the correlation between clinical symptoms and observations pave the way for important transitions from interpreting and balancing the body to intervening actively upon it,⁴⁹ and from ideas of prevention to those of treatment and cure. In the nineteenth century there was a 'desire to document, quantify, and classify old age.'⁵⁰ This period saw the pathologisation of the ageing body and the imposition of a discipline, geriatrics, on the elderly:

One effect of nineteenth-century medical researchers' careful classification of the workings of the human body was that the body became fixed in description as a set of signs. Because these signs were interpreted as indicators of health or infirmity and of normality or deviance, researchers laying the groundwork for the disciplines of gerontology and geriatrics were also imposing discipline upon the body. The old body was treated as a sign system which signalled deterioration and degeneration, and these signs could be interpreted only by scientists.⁵¹

Revealing how the medical episteme impacts on language, it was in the mid-Victorian era that the words 'senile' and 'senescence' gained pathological connotations. In previous eras

⁴⁷ Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, quoted by Mary Efronini Gregory in *Freedom in French Enlightenment Thought* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2010), p. 156.

⁴⁸ Susannah Ottaway, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine*, p. 349.

⁴⁹ Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (USA: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 39.

⁵⁰ Teresa Mangum, 'Growing Old: Age' in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Herbert F. Tucker (USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), p. 104.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

the words referred to old age (1481), to growing old (1695), or to becoming infirm as a result of age (1791); but by 1841 they referred to weakness and later in the century, to a specific pathological state.⁵² From the noninterventionist role of premodern medicine there is an impulse in the nineteenth century to observe, diagnose, and meliorate the ageing body: to intervene actively on senescence. This is reflected on the publications that emerged during this time, such as *The Code of Health and Longevity* (1806) by Sir John Sinclair (1754-1835), *An Essay on the Disorders of Old Age* (1819) by Sir Anthony Carlisle (1768-1840), *Clinical Lectures on the Diseases of Old Age* (1867) by Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-93), *Grey's Anatomy* (1856) –which viewed the body as a visible anatomical map on which disease could be localised and disciplinary knowledges coordinated – Thomas Bailey's (1785-1856) *Records of Longevity* (1857), William J. Thoms' (1803-85) *Human Longevity: Its Facts and Its Fictions* (1873), Arnold Lorand's *Old Age Deferred* (1912), and Elie Metchnikoff *The Prolongation of Life: Optimistic Studies* (1907). In *Old Age Deferred: The Causes of Old age and its Postponement by Hygiene and Therapeutic Measures*, Lorand opens with the following premise:

[W]hile it is still impossible for us to create a young man out of an old one, it is quite within the boundaries of possibility, as we shall endeavour to demonstrate herein, to prolong our term of youthfulness by ten or twenty years. In other words we need no longer grown old at forty or fifty; we may live to the age of ninety or one hundred years, instead of dying at sixty or seventy. All this can be brought about by the observance of certain hygienic measures, and by improving the functions of a certain few of the glandular structures in our body.⁵³

⁵² Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age*, p. 41.

⁵³ Arnold Lorand, 'Preface', *Old Age Deferred: The Causes of Old age and its Postponement by Hygiene and Therapeutic Measures*, 4th edn., trans. by Arnold Lorand (Philadelphia: F.A Davis Company, 1913), p. iii.

Old Age Deferred shows the same positivist bias as much geriatric/gerontological research and longevity medicine today. In the nineteenth century medical advancements, meliorist efforts of reformers in public health, and the gradual secularisation of life give rise to a new prescriptive literature on old age. Ideas and theories on rejuvenation and ‘immortality’ move from the stale scholasticism of some of its theological, philosophical, noninterventionist medical roots to the commonplace of society and a reaffirmation of meliorism in response to the problem of death in an ageing society. Lorand explains why age-associated phenomena occur, offering a synthetic description of their manifestations and in the process extending the work of its forbearers such as Hippocrates and Celsus and their work on the clinical aspects of ageing.

The binary logic of normal versus pathological was far more visible with the development of geriatrics (1850) and institutions such as La Salpêtrière and Bicêtre in France where observations on the elderly were accumulated. At this time ‘the studies of old age became exact and systematic’⁵⁴ (with the exception of Charles Eduourd Brown-Sequard who, in 1889 claimed he could ‘rejuvenate old men with a tonic containing the crushed testicles of dogs’)⁵⁵ and senescence became a more acutely medicalised phase of life as the elderly began to be studied in the therapeutic and juridical space of the asylum. It is possible that one root of age prejudice and gerontophobia today is in the early nineteenth century’s institutional solution to the problems of old age, as well its moralistic ideas about senescence where individuals, ‘committed to limitless accumulation of wealth and health, deman[d] relentless control over one’s body and physical energy and vie[wed] physical decline and disease essentially as

⁵⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Stephen S. Hall, *Merchants of Immortality: Chasing the Dream of Human Life Extension* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), p. 193.

failure or sin.’⁵⁶ It was during the latter half of the nineteenth century that the very onset of old age was in dispute, with the Friendly Societies Act of 1875 establishing 50 as the age at which individuals were eligible for charitable gifts; the Old Age Pensions Committee of 1898 establishing 65 as the retirement age for men; and the Old Age Pensions act of 1908 pushing this up to 70.⁵⁷ In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) Thomas Malthus gives some indication of the changes old age is undergoing: ‘man will not absolutely become immortal, yet the duration between his birth and natural death will increase without ceasing [...] and may be properly expressed through the word indefinite.’⁵⁸ However, perhaps one of the most formative periods in the formation of gerontological thought emerged in the early twentieth century with the work of psychiatrist and neuropathologist Alois Alzheimer (1864-1915) and his contemporaries. Conceptualising the ‘senile’ within a biomedical and psychiatric framework, research into Alzheimer’s disease contributed ‘to the transformation of what had been generally considered “senility” into a specific disease with specific pathological characteristics and symptoms.’⁵⁹ The work of Alzheimer and Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926) on the pathological features of senility was perhaps a significant turning point in the pathologisation of age and the emergence of old age as a sub-discipline of medicine. The histological work of Alzheimer on Auguste D., charting the progress of brain atrophy in sufferers of dementia, challenged what may have been the conventional or canonical indices of decline in the elderly, and significantly destabilised the ‘assumption that mental and

⁵⁶ Thomas R. Cole, ‘The “Enlightened” View of Aging: Victorian Morality in a New Key’ in *What Does it Mean to Grow Old?: Reflections from the Humanities*, ed. by Sally Gadow & Thomas R. Cole (USA: Duke University Press, 1986), pp. 115-131 (p. 115).

⁵⁷ Teresa Mangum, *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 104.

⁵⁸ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, vol. 2 (London: Elibron Classics, 2006), p. 5.

⁵⁹ Patrick Fox, From Senility to Alzheimer's Disease: The Rise of the Alzheimer's Disease Movement, *The Milbank Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (1989), pp. 58-102 (59), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3350070> [accessed 12/11/11].

physical deterioration were normal in old age.’⁶⁰ Robert Butler (1927-2010), who coined the term ‘ageism’ in 1968, believed that ‘virtually all of the physical and mental deterioration commonly attributed to old age was more properly understood as the product of disease processes distinct from aging,’⁶¹ which is what has been perhaps the consistent implication in many of the earlier medical texts on ageing. The consignment of senility to the realm of choice, as implied in its very medicalisation and the sheer amount of literature dedicated to its cure, is neither novel nor particularly contentious by this period.

For centuries, the subject of ageing has been connected less with existential angst or libidinal fear of death, and more with a liberal humanism and growing secularism as people have increasingly sought insight into, control over, and freedom from mortality. We might suggest that prolongevity today is split between religion, mythos, and science fiction on the one hand, and clinical rationality and scientific sophistication on the other. Oneiric fantasies of immortality, notions of turning back time, defying age, or regaining one’s youth now comprise relatively quotidian cultural discourses of ageing. They form the basis of trite liberal humanist ideologies where individuals are invited to assume control over their body and wilfully aestheticise, medicalise, or simply consume their way out of age. One is invited to hold death in abeyance through a regimen of accoutrements in consumer culture and biomedical interventions, including:

pharmaceutical drugs, cosmetic surgery, dieting and exercise, resonate with the strength of consumer culture to create the desire for health, longevity, sexual fulfilment, youth and beauty [...] [T]he malfunctioning body can be repaired, holding

⁶⁰J.F. Ballenger, ‘Progress in the History of Alzheimer’s Disease: The Importance of Context’ in *Alzheimer’s Disease: A Century of Scientific and Clinical Research*, ed. by George Perry et al. (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2006), p. 7.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 10.

at bay the ravages of time [...] promising the prospect of erasing boundaries between chronobiology and physiological capacities in old age.⁶²

Ideas of rejuvenation, or even the possibility of sempiternity, are overcome by a triteness, rationalism, and pragmatism; they are swept up in high-income, youth-obsessed capitalist cultures and associated less with science fiction and myth and more with healthcare stratagems, commodity fetishism, dilettantish consumer beauty regimes, and medical and scientific ambition. Immortality may retain its inherent transcendentalism, but may be characterised as a *bathetic* transcendentalism –an ideology with religious, mythical, and science-fictional origins, and a new form of humanism in the context of demographic change, a panacea to the gerontocracy forged unwittingly from medical achievements of the past century. As such, immortality begins to characterise more rational, logico-scientific discourses of ageing, the everyday consumer vernacular, a liberal humanism and secular optimism as people seek control over and insight into the ageing body and reconceptualise as optional, reversible, or preventable the most quintessentially mortal of conditions: ageing. Notions of turning back or arresting time are dominated by a triteness and uncanny pragmatism as they increasingly characterise aspects of medicine, consumer capitalism, the everyday vernacular and bourgeois mentality. With the plethora of anti-ageing products,⁶³ discourses of immortality, it seems, are becoming further and further removed from the realms of myth, alchemy, and more recently the alternative epistemologies of science fiction. From the Gnostic imagination to empirical facticity, immortality and prolongevity comprise a bureaucratic, medically and scientifically sophisticated system aimed not simply at

⁶² Pia C. Kontos, *Ageing and Place: Perspectives, Policy, Practice*, ed. by Gavin J. Andrews et al. (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 33.

⁶³ E.g.: Clarins Multi-Active Night Youth Recovery Cream; Clarins Multi-Active Day Early Wrinkle Correction Cream; D'Occitane Immortelle Anti-Ageing Recovery Set; Decleor Aroma Night Regenerating Beauty Cream; Garnier Youthful Radiance Eye Roll-on; Clarins Age Control Hand Lotion; Decleor Vitaroma Wrinkle Prevention Energising Eye Cream; L'Oreal Paris Dermo-Expertise Youth Code Rejuvenating Anti-Wrinkle Night Cream; Emma Hardie Amazing Face Rejuvenating Night Cream; Darphin Age-Defying Dermabrasion; Betty Hula The Secret Anti-Ageing Wonder; md Formulations Vit-A-Plus Anti-Ageing Serum; Trilogy Age-Proof CoQ10 Serum; Lierac Dioptricreme Age-Defense Cream for Winkles Around the Eyes.

pathologising age but mortality. Rejuvenation, like for Aeson in *Metamorphoses* and Iolas in *The Children of Herakles*, is swept up in notions of right and entitlement in high-income, youth-obsessed capitalist cultures – a hedonistic utilitarianism where one has the right, and more recently the *means*, to triumph over the limitations of the body:

The goal of staying “forever youthful” has become something of a fetish in modern societies: the popularity of Botox, Viagra, facelifts, anti-ageing potions and other modern elixirs of youth testify to that.⁶⁴

The anti-ageing phenomenon in contemporary western culture has secularised more religious configurations of immortality or the afterlife; have de-sensationalised the transcendentalism and imaginative or alternative epistemologies of science fiction; have blurred the boundaries between mythos and science, magic and technology; and have rendered science fiction a new *prescriptive literature* for an ageing society. Discourses of immortality and rejuvenation have deviated from their mythical, literary, religious, and esoteric medical roots, and have become embroiled in a crass consumerism and banality as phrases such as ‘age rewind’, ‘age defy’, and ‘turn back time’ begin to prevail in the more quotidian realm of consumer capitalism, longevity medicine, and healthcare paradigms. Arguably they have even been connected to a sense of urgency, a humanitarian concern or cultural exigency, as previously fantastical or arcane realities and epistemologies gain a different significance – inherit a sardonic pragmatism, perhaps – in the context of a society trying to cope with an ageing culture: the gerontocracy, that is, forged unwittingly from its own medical achievements of the past century.

The pathologisation of age has been considered by Tom Kitwood in *Dementia Reconsidered* (1997) as a form of ageism. Kitwood argues that anti-ageing justifies and gives credence to

⁶⁴ John Macnicol, ‘Analysing Ageism and Age Discrimination’ in *Age Discrimination: An Historical and Contemporary Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 5.

prejudicial or gerontophobic attitudes,⁶⁵ and has the effect of transforming blatant hostility and incredulity toward old age into ‘enlightened’ prejudice. The nature of anti-ageing medicine is summarised by Dr Ronald Klatz, of the American Academy of Anti-Ageing Medicine (A4M):

We shouldn’t be celebrating ageing. We should be fighting tooth and nail against ageing. Because ageing is linked to a disease process, so is it natural? Tuberculosis was natural, polio was natural, the plague was natural. We at 4AM are saying that ageing can and should be treated. The degenerative processes of ageing are diseases, ageing *per se* is not a disease, but the pathological processes of ageing that lead to chronic degenerative diseases and death are.⁶⁶

This is echoed by the gerontologist Tom Kirkwood, who in the 2001 Reith Lectures commented:

We now understand that our bodies are not programmed with some unavoidable sell-by date; we are not programmed to die [...] The first and most encouraging message is that as soon as we recognise that we are programmed not to die, but to survive, we can see that the ageing process is malleable. Ageing comes about through the gradual build-up of unrepaired faults in the cells and tissues of our bodies as we live our lives, not as a result of some active mechanism for death and destruction. If we can discover the nature of these faults, we can hope to slow their accumulation.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Bavidge (2006) likewise argues that the systemic pathologisation of the elderly is a form of ageism: ‘we should think of old age as offering alternative rather than impaired ways of experience life’ (cited by Julian C. Hughes, ‘Future Scoping: Ethical Issues in Aging and Dementia’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Neuroethics*, p. 616).

⁶⁶ Ronald Klatz, cited by Astrid Stuckelberger in *Anti-Ageing Medicine: Myths and Chances* (Hochschulverlag AD an der ETH Zurich, Switzerland, 2008), p. 210.

⁶⁷ Tom Kirkwood, *The End of Age: Why Everything About Ageing is Changing* (London: Profile Books, 2001), pp. 11 & 13.

Kirkwood eschews the apparent inevitability and determinism of age. He portrays senescence as more a series of curable pathologies than a biologically, or divinely, preordained process of decline and decay. Consequently, ideas of rejuvenation, or even the possibility of immortality, begin to characterise more rational, logico-scientific discourses, and emerge from the dry scholasticism and conceptual realities of earlier literatures into an increasingly dominant and prosaic cultural meme. I ask not only how the literature and language of ageing today has been challenged by contemporary medical and cultural constructions of age, but where they stand in relation to the cultural antecedents of anti-ageing. The literature and language of ageing, I argue, is not responding to a uniquely modern destabilisation of age and age categories, but one that has persisted for generations. I hope to demonstrate how this timeless humanist fallacy inheres within the semiology of age in modern and contemporary literature, and how the representation of ageing remains ‘the ultimate challenge for the novelist’⁶⁸ as both medical capabilities and the hopes and sophistry of the anti-ageing revolution continue to alter the nature of human ageing.

ii) The Literature of Age: Intimations of Immortality

In literature today, immortality is not a subject most likely found in science fiction and fantasy, but traditional realist narratives of ageing. It is embedded within the very semiology of ageing in modern and contemporary prose, and in each of this thesis’ four chapters I hope to show how, within the formal, semantic, and structural properties of old age narratives, rests a powerful but implicit repudiation of age. Chapter 1 is an analysis of Beckettian prose and stagecraft in relation to the ordeal of ageing. In Beckett’s *oeuvre* ageing is represented as a malign external force: a theatrical contrivance, and a disturbing, often perverse affectation

⁶⁸ Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing*, p. 3.

that is rarely natural or normal. His theatre is bound in an aesthetics of failure, characterised by a linguistic, scenic, and choreographic sparseness; and likewise his prose, often highly and disorientatingly tautological, lacking in plot and character developments, both *is* and yields little more than a hermeneutics of despair. His characters are burdened as much by their senescing bodies –bodies doomed to decay and to die –as by Beckett’s ostensibly spiteful indifference in the face of his own novelistic and directorial obligation to *create*. His dramaturgy in particular suggests a failure or refusal to enliven his own creations: a self-styled reluctance, negligence, or exhaustion in the face of artistic creation. Consequently, the themes of waiting, anticipation, and confusion prevail in his works. His choreographic, scenic, stylistic and linguistic decisions torture, tantalise, and spite his characters, whilst permitting them to exist –if only just. His characters senesce not because it is natural or timely but because it is imposed upon them, and as a result ageing has much less to do with the fate of the body than with the machinations of theatre (within which the characters are unwittingly trapped) and the artistic disobligation of the novelist/director –Beckett himself.

It is all too tempting to essentialise the Beckett *oeuvre*. A great deal of scholarly work has labelled Beckett an oppressive and pessimistic writer and his work a negative, prejudicial portrait of old age that eludes any sense of hope or optimism. His representation of senescence has been described as ‘a horrific study of the implications of growing old and the undesirability of reaching those twilight years, when all we have to look forward to is bad health, isolation, and the overwhelming need to reach the grave.’⁶⁹ Despite the serio-comic plights of individual characters, the subject of organic decay is used by Beckett as injunction to face the broader realities of human existence in the twentieth century. Following his death in 1989, it was written of Beckett in *The Irish Times* that ‘old age seemed peculiarly becoming to him, seemed his proper element, its characteristics of isolation and immobility

⁶⁹ Kathryn White, ‘Old Age: The Dictatorship of Time’ in *Beckett and Decay* (London & New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 22.

according best with his general view of humanity's lot.⁷⁰ The necrotic minimalism of his dramaturgy and the confused, disembodied, and reflective isolation of his prose works create an aesthetics of failure and despair that would seem to take its lead from the ordeal of ageing. Literature, for Beckett, is not an imaginative, pastoral retreat from the world and its exigencies. He rejects literary and theatrical embellishments that interpose themselves between reality and representation, and instead admits the condition of western culture and the phenomenology of ageing body into his prose and dramaturgy. In doing so, he offers a bodily and representational sense of failure and affliction: 'he had a compulsion to create his own wounds and rub salt in them. Aesthetically, he needed to suffer pain.'⁷¹ Through the choreographic, linguistic, and scenic sparseness and his disembodied reflective meditations on ageing and decay he rehearses the twentieth century's 'social and military horrors, its criminal wastage of lives and of the planet's resources, [and] its refusal to look at the consequences of selfishness and short-term profit.'⁷² His literary aesthetic, though densely self-referential in parts, and elitist and exclusivist in its modernistic complexity, comprises a pretension to evoke the *whole world* and truths about the condition of Man. Beckett still uses the ordeal of ageing and its universality as a vehicle through which invoke a sense of *human* rather than specifically national crisis –the condition of humankind as a whole and 'the chaos and general mess of *all* existence [my italics].'⁷³ He offers a sense of social, political, and moralistic breakdown metaphorised in the decaying body and extended mimetically in his adoption of an ostensibly negligent and deteriorative aesthetic. Some of his major prose works, such as *Molloy* and *Watt*, for example, are syntactically difficult and tautological in places, mimicking the eponymous characters' ineffectual attempts at locomotion. In the same

⁷⁰ Fintan O'Toole et al., 'Modern Irish Dramatists: Samuel Beckett, *Irish Times* 25 December 1989' in *Critical Moments: Fintan O'Toole on Modern Irish Theatre*, ed. by Julia Furay & Redmond O'Hanlon (Dublin: A Carysfort Press Book, 2003), p. 307.

⁷¹ John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder Publications, 2001), p. 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

vein, scenically and choreographically, his plays ‘tak[e] the form of a cycle run-down. We perceive a process of dying, both psychic and physical,’⁷⁴ as his characters, often encased, entombed, or buried, are rendered silent and/or immobile in such a way as to plunge his plays into a death-like torpor and a jointly oppressive and transcendent stillness. Paradoxically, his exaggeratedly senescent characters seem like victims of time; yet in their inertia and silence they also seem liberated *from* time and exempt from death. Their moments of stasis and speechlessness yield a humbling and candid admission of their humanity; but they are also *immortalised* by their stillness, embalmed, it seems, by Beckett’s own stylised negligence. The actors in Beckett’s plays are inhibited, stultified by his choreographic/scenic decisions: buried, entombed, or encased on stage, Beckett does not permit freedom of movement or creative artistic licence, and so a self-crafted impotence pervades his dramaturgy.

Beckett’s characters senesce in a way that is rarely normal or natural; senescence is not a natural decline but a perverse, non-human affectation, a form of self-abuse, even. Although his thematic and stylistic preoccupation with age and decay has been linked to a pretention to evoke broader existential and humanistic issues, scholars have attributed it to rising life expectancies and demographic change in post-war western culture. With improvements in health care comes a greater affluence of old people and age-related pathologies. The prevalence of decrepit, ageing characters in Beckett’s *oeuvre* is described as ‘a reflection of the condition of more and more people in the ageing western world.’⁷⁵ It is a paradox of modern medicine today that whilst improvements in the quality of life are made, the period of life most associated with retrograde change, where the body experiences greater homeostatic imbalance (and is thus more susceptible to disease and death), is extended. The atrophying, maladroit bodies occupying so many of Beckett’s works, and the vast, ostensibly *incalculable* age of characters such as Malone in *Malone Dies*, is ‘prescient, foreshadowing the situation

⁷⁴ Andrew K. Kennedy, *Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 33-4.

⁷⁵ Fintan O’Toole, *Critical Moments*, p. 307.

of many frail elderly today who live into their eighties, nineties, and beyond.⁷⁶ In Beckett's works, each character's abject, '*endless* little body [my italics]'⁷⁷ gives the sense not of ageing naturally, but as ageing *inhumanely*, as if afflicted by a malign external force. Collectively, his dramatis personae force us to confront the world of rising life expectancies and demographic change—a future where 'onward looks like downward; their ageing, their deterioration, their time-spinning [...] all a part of a run-down, towards their eventual ends.'⁷⁸ His characters are afflicted; their old age is a sadistic imposition, an *injunction* to senesce (without ever attaining death) made by some malevolent, unseen inquisitor. His aesthetics of despair, provoked by 'a heightened awareness of the senescent'⁷⁹ in ageing Europe, is described as 'the product of a civilisation which has become suddenly old.'⁸⁰ Despite the universality of ageing, Beckett dehumanises the old, confers decay and impotence upon his very aesthetic, and consequently the subject of ageing oscillates between consoling familiarity and profound alienation. His characters' unreal, stylised senescence and the serio-comic strangeness and uniqueness of their plights magnify their frustrations and physical maladies, as well as the malevolent machinations of the theatre within which they remain trapped. As Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman have commented: 'it is strange that in a generation which has put all its stress on youth and achievement, he alone should have written about old age, loneliness and decrepitude, a subject which arouses perhaps our deepest repressed guilt and fears.'⁸¹

The premise from which this chapter starts is that Beckett's work, conscious though it is of the plights of humanity in an ageing post-war society, does not reflect but *refracts* the

⁷⁶ Kathleen M. Woodward, *Ageing and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (USA: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 132.

⁷⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Lessness* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970), p. 12.

⁷⁸ Kennedy, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 43.

⁷⁹ Zoe Brennan, 'Paradigms of Ageing and Ageism' in *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), p. 18.

⁸⁰ V.S. Pritchett, '44: New Statesman (1966)' in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Lawrence Graver & Raymond Federman (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 216-20 (p. 219).

⁸¹ Lawrence Graver et al., *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, p. 219.

realities of ageing –is a tacit monument, even, to immortality. For Beckett’s *dramatis personae*, ageing is an imposition, a strange affectation, a form of abuse from some malign, unseen inquisitor, and at times even a form of self-harm. As such it is a condition that can, if his characters did but know it, be discontinued at will. Despite Beckett’s ostensible preoccupation with ageing, much of his prose work and dramaturgy subtly invert the conventional or canonical indices of decay and decline –transform them into a new paradigm of hope. His semiology of age in his prose works and his choreographic, scenic, and linguistic choices in his dramaturgy are replete with allusions to choice, and gesture often to the possibility of cessation, remittance, or respite. The anatomical and directorial are often conflated: bodily failure, for instance, is not conveyed through the actors’ bodies, but through the use of props whereby they are restricted, stultified, confused, and impotent. Age is not a condition of the body, but a theatrical contrivance; a condition that comes not from within but from *without*, and as such ‘much of Beckett’s work can be read on one level in terms of a conflict between tormentors and victims.’⁸²In both his prose and his plays, it is not the referent of the body that dominates the representation of ageing and decay, but the milieu of props, prostheses, mechanisms, and technologies that surround it. Beckett’s bodies are a plethora of technological annexations, and as such the body is not a totality but a series of occlusions operated inexpertly, maladroitly, and tragicomically by his characters. In Beckett’s theatre, his characters’ obscure and fractal bodies and reluctant locutions seem at the mercy of the spite of the theatre and its inauspicious machinations. Beckettian theatre is a miasma of failure, and the characters’ hyperbolic and stylised decrepitude and the aversiveness and constrictiveness of their bodies conjoin the theatrical and the anatomical. As such it is the theatre itself that goes on to metaphorise old age or indeed *impose* old age on its characters. Ageing is rarely a natural or normal condition for Beckett’s characters, but an

⁸² Garin Dowd, *Abstract Machines: Samuel Beckett and Philosophy after Deleuze and Guattari* (Amsterdam & New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), p.168.

unnatural and alien burden, a carapacial or pseudo-senescence, imposed on them by a malign external force whose origin, in his prose and theatre, seems technological and directorial respectively. His dramaturgy engages with old age thematically, but belies its ostensibly realist tableau in its self-reflexivity and modernistic predilection for novelty and polemicism. Amir Cohen-Shalev comments that ‘making existential despair a springboard for creative work was the essence of his literary innovation.’⁸³ Similarly Andrew Kennedy argues that in Beckett’s works ‘the dark (which includes despair and recurrent nihilism) yields a kind of light, the acute sense of impotence releases a kind of strength’ and constitutes a ‘powerful negative/creative force.’⁸⁴ He offers, then, a subtly conflicted portrait of ageing and decay. In a similar vein his prose constitutes a thematic engagement with old age on the one hand, but its semiological transcendence on the other. His characters’ bodies are fractal, ersatz, and ‘robot-like’, and fatigue like ‘over-used automat[a].’⁸⁵ The descriptions of wizened, senescing bodies as run-down automata –or even vehicular prostheses –function both as an admission of and release from old age. His metaphors compound a sense of dispossession, alterity, and strangeness in age, yet offer a bathetic transcendence of age with the scarcity of the conventional or canonical ‘signs’ of ageing and his refusal to narrate ageing *in the flesh*. This is reflected in the scholarly works emerging on Beckett that focus on the implicit technologisation of Beckettian bodies, including: Yoshiki Tajiri’s *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body* (2007), Garin Dowd’s *Abstract Machines: Samuel Beckett and Philosophy after Deleuze and Guattari* (2007), and Ulrika Maude’s *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (2009). The characters exist in bodies beyond bodies, suffering from age but exempt from death; and this highlights, and to some extent literalises, the themes of decay and entropy, but

⁸³ Amir Cohen-Shalev, *Both Worlds at Once: Art in Old Age* (USA: University Press of America, Inc., 2002), p. 112.

⁸⁴ Kennedy, p. 14.

⁸⁵ Kennedy, p. 97.

also, if covertly, is teasingly and provocatively germane to trans- and posthumanist discourses.

The origins of ageing in the Beckett canon are not physiological, but theatrical and technological, and in adroitly suppressing the body in favour of its technological or mechanical uncannies, Beckett also evades the subject of age. What I will seek to examine is how Beckett's characters exist on both sides of the divide aged/ageless, old/young. Beckett's preoccupation with ageing is highly conflicted: thematically, it evokes broad humanistic, moralistic, and existential issues on the condition of Man, metaphorised in the decaying body; yet various features of his prose and stagecraft undermine and even invert the indices of decay and decline by giving them a sense of artifice and a seditious metatheatricity. In essence, whilst his thematic preoccupation centres upon the pathos of age, by contrast the formal features of his work are quite simply salvatory: they contribute to the representation of age as inhuman, excrescent, or not natural, and have the effect of conveying the ageing process as optional –as a disturbing affectation or imposition from a malign external force. Ageing, for Beckett's characters, is a theatrical contrivance, an affectation or form of self-abuse, and at times results in actions or postures that stem less from pain, disability, or cripplement, and more from a sense of compulsion, obsession, or nervous tic. As such Beckett's literature of age is characterised by a wry defeatism, although this is perhaps the basis for Woodward's claim that '[w]hat is blatantly manifest in Beckett's work over the length of his career –the representation of old age –seems to have been systematically misrecognized by his literary critics.' In suggesting Beckett's aesthetic is in some way bound up in an adroit resistance to the realities of age, Woodward suggests that 'we come up against the repression of ageing and old age.'⁸⁶ I aim to demonstrate, however, that the repression of ageing is fundamental to his very language of age and the nature of his stagecraft. Allusions

⁸⁶ Woodward, *Ageing and its Discontents*, p. 132.

to technology and inorganic structures dominate Beckett's visual lexicon of ageing in his prose, and this is extended in his dramaturgy as Beckett's own directorial decisions are alluded to, magnified, and emerge as a metaphor –and ultimately the very *reason* –for his characters' decrepitude. In his prose the boundaries between the biological and technological determinism are blurred, and on stage the boundaries between the anatomical and the dramaturgical/directorial are blurred.

However, this chapter moves beyond the Beckett canon, as I both examine Beckett's semiology of age and use that as a foundation from which to critique what it means to age in a technologically progressive society. As well as an examination of Beckettian bodies, this chapter forms a critique of trans-/posthumanism from a humanist perspective –a topic I readdress in the final chapter. I will go on to consider the ordeal of ageing and the victim/tormentor dynamic as part of a dialectical critique on the technologisation of humankind. I will study the pervasiveness of technology in contemporary culture, and how dependence on social media and assistive technologies displaces the primacy of the body and renders the human 'at best a mere appendix to the machine, at worst the machine's obliterated victim'⁸⁷ –in other words, ironically fulfilling a death wish in the powerful renunciation of mortality. I shall argue that there is little that is promethean in current technological innovation; that the technologisation of humankind represents a hyperfinality, or escalation of finalities as we systematically and wilfully retire parts of the body/bodily functions; and that as a result, *technological* discourses, inevitably and bathetically, invoke *gerontological* ones –the 'fate of inertia in a saturated world [...] swept up in this gigantic process of inertia by acceleration.'⁸⁸ I will examine technological discourses as embroiled inextricably in a hermeneutics of failure and dejection, extending the argument of Paul Virilio that reliance on

⁸⁷ James E. Katz et al., 'Introduction' to *Mediating the Human Body: Technology, Communication, and Fashion* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2003), p. 2.

⁸⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. by Philip Beitchman et al., ed. by Jim Fleming (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), p. 13.

technology predicates dependency, highlights the exciting yet ultimately threatening permeability of the body and the duplicability of its functions, holding able-bodied, *functional* Man in abeyance –or in the words of Virilio: ‘mak[ing] the super-equipped able-bodied person almost the exact equivalent of the motorized and wired disabled person.’⁸⁹ The chapter, then, is a study of how Beckett’s stagecraft, his prose works’ bathos and conflicted semiology of ageing, and the decay-victimisation nexus that occurs throughout Beckettian art, advances the philosophical study of technology and poses questions about what it means to age in a technologically progressive culture.

Chapter two examines the semiology of age in modern and contemporary realist narratives of ageing, and extends many of the issues raised in the previous chapter. I examine how the inorganic objects and structures dominate the visual lexicon of ageing in contemporary prose. The literature I examine in this section, including Kingsley Amis’ *Ending Up* (1972) and Alice Sebold’s *The Almost Moon* (2007), are works that represent the human experience of time, organic decay, and death with recourse not to the senescing *body* but to architecture, domestic furnishings, and miscellaneous objects in the throes of decay, neglect, or disrepair. I term this the prosthetic vision of age. In the prosthetic vision, the milieu of objects, from dilapidated architecture to broken crockery, recapitulates aspects of the characters’ corporeality, and thus the external environment becomes akin to an extended, prosthetic body. The prosthesis is a conflicted image, with both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand the prosthesis is a metonym for disablement, a commemorative monument to the body’s lost or dwindling efficacies; on the other hand it is a corrective, substitutive addition that exceeds, extends, and survives the body’s constitutively fragile structure. It is in this sense an image of persistence and survival. I examine how writers metaphorise the milieu of objects that survive, and exist outside of and around the body; and how the external

⁸⁹ Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans. by Julie Rose (London & New York: Verso, 1997), p. 11.

environment is implicated in the representation of age-associated pain and the innermost sensations –the kinaesthesias and coenaesthesias –of the senescing body. In the prosthetic vision, the physical environment, from abandoned architecture to lacerated tennis balls, function as a cartography of the decaying body and constitute a hyperbolic and provocatively inhuman rendering of the vicissitudes, invisible geographies, and subjective experiences of the ageing body. The semiology of ageing in this sense, I argue, hinges on the representation of bodies *beyond* bodies; a representation that does not impassively trace but actively extends the contours of the ageing body, dispersing the ageing body, both entropically and posthumanly, across different substrates. The central question of this chapter will be whether representationally the prosthetic vision is a mimesis of decay –presenting the body not as a totality but as a series of irreducibly varied objects and spaces, and resisting all holistic and associationist conceptions of the body –or whether the prosthetic vision marks traditional realist narratives of ageing as covertly transhumanist.

The prosthetic vision as much *marks* as *masks* the senescent subject, both elucidating and eliding the ageing body; conferring some naturalism onto the representation of age, but causing the textual images of age to fade into sublimation and repression. The prosthetic vision is problematic and paradoxical in the sense that it represents human ageing, but without recourse to the human body. It draws on themes associated with traditional realist narratives of age but problematises the traditional indices of decay and decline through a metaphorical use of objects and structures that can be replaced or restored. In its wilful, deliberate, and systematic effacement of the senescing body, the prosthetic vision stresses a sense of alterity, foreignness, and strangeness or excrescence in age –a hyperbolic evocation, perhaps, of the western cultural narration of a ‘dehumanized old age.’⁹⁰ The prosthetic vision maps the contours and cadences of the senescing body in its most unruly, abject, and exigent

⁹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 7.

states; but the contingency of metaphor, the densities in connotation or semantic openness foster a sense of distance and deviation from its subject matter, plunging the cold realities of old age into illusion and sophistry. As Emmanuel Lévinas describes: ‘every verbal signification lies at the confluence of countless semantic rivers,’⁹¹ and this chapter is a study of the implications of metaphor and polysemy in narratives of ageing. As Susan Sontag argues, ‘illness is *not* a metaphor, and [...] the most truthful way of regarding illness –and the healthiest way of being ill –is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking.’⁹² This chapter analyses the use of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms in socio-literary discourses of ageing, asking how the synthetic dominates the visual lexicon of age and analysing the anthropomorphisation of architecture, domestic furnishings, and assistive devices in the representation of age-related pain and discomfort. This, I argue, renders the aged subject not simply post-biological, but post-gendered; the characters exist in bodies *beyond* bodies in both a plaintive and emancipatory sexlessness/agelessness; and this gives rise to a conflicted semiology of ageing where a character can at once suffer from and transcend the biological/physiological markers of age and sex in a single instance. I shall ask how far the prosthetic vision of age implicitly unites gerontological and trans-/posthumanist discourses; how the semiotics of immortality pervade traditional realist narratives of ageing; how such narratives engage with the pathos of ageing but offer also a new paradigm of hope; and what this means for the study of age and mortality in literature.

In recent years, a great deal of scholarship has emerged on the impact of demographic change and medical progressivism on literary topic and expression, as well as pragmatist conceptions of narrative as a medical resource. Hepworth describes fiction as ‘an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society,’ and that it is

⁹¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, ‘Signification and Sense’ in *Humanism of the Other*, trans. by Nidra Poller (USA: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 11.

⁹² Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 3.

a ‘particularly valuable resource precisely because it allows the writer, through the exercise of imagination, access to the personal variations and ambiguities underlying the common condition of growing older.’⁹³ Literature and literary erudition have also been considered:

...an essential form of seeking and representing knowledge has profoundly shaped gerontology’s understanding of the search for meaning and identity. [...] Along with interpretation and narrative, rhetoric has also emerged as a tool of gerontological study.⁹⁴

In 1959 novelist and scientist Charles Percy Snow lamented the emergence of ‘two cultures’:

I believe the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups... Literary intellectuals at one pole –at the other scientists, and the most representative, the physical scientists [...] Their attitudes are so different that, even on the level of emotion, they can’t find much common ground.⁹⁵

Chapter three examines how the ordeal of ageing –specifically the pathologies of ageing –has united these two cultures. I seek to demonstrate how developing neurological theory and medical insights into Alzheimer’s disease have impacted literary representations of thought and thinking in contemporary fiction. In the century since Alois Alzheimer’s research, literature has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to reflect the changing nature and depth of knowledge about the brain. Literary modernism saw the development of stream-of-consciousness (a phrase used by William James in *Principles of Memory* in 1890): a mode of narration in which writers attempted to reproduce the nature, course, and rhythm of consciousness in narrative form. Writers such as Virginia Woolf did not attempt to mediate,

⁹³ Ibid., 1 & 4.

⁹⁴ Multiple Contributors, *Gerontology: Perspectives and Issues*, 3rd edn., ed. by Janet Wilmoth et al. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2007), p. 253.

⁹⁵ C.P Snow, ‘The Rede Lecture, 1959: Two Cultures’ in *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 3-4.

domesticate, or tidy the vagaries of the mind into a logical, grammatical order, but strove toward a greater sense of equivalence between cognitive and linguistic states. What I shall be examining in this chapter is how literary experimentalism in a modernist vein can give insight into the nature and experience of Alzheimer's disease from the perspective of the sufferer. I shall consider how the use of mimetic form and the self-reflexivity and poeticisation of prose style in contemporary Alzheimer's fiction reflects modernist techniques, and the extent to which this is giving rise to a second, more conspicuously 'medical' phase of literary modernism. In conjunction with this I will consider how, in its associations with modernistic *nova* and artistic ferment, energy, flair, and polemicism, ageing is presented as a powerful force for change and creativity in Anglophone literature. As Gene D. Cohen comments:

While most of us accept that wisdom is a special provenance of ageing, many people have the reverse view of creativity: they believe it is a flower of youth that blooms less and less frequently as the decades pass. This is yet another myth about ageing that persists stubbornly in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.⁹⁶

I shall analyse the cultural importance of countertraditional experimentalism in Alzheimer's fiction, and the implications of a body of literature that confers novelty on Alzheimer's. I shall analyse how literary experimentalism, as used to explore and elucidate neuropathological states, is shedding the self-reflexivity and exclusivism often linked with anti-humanist visions of high modernism, and is instead demonstrating its potential value as a medical and gerontological resource. I ask how the use of mimetic form in neuro-atypical writing can give the illusion of an unmediated, *subjective* portrayal; how far this prompts a 'clinical' attitude towards textual analysis; and the extent to which a medically-attuned,

⁹⁶ Gene D. Cohen, *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Ageing Brain* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 168

symptomatic or 'pathological' aesthetic formalism, where neurological condition dictate narrative construction, is *medically useful*.

As life expectancies rise, there is a call for literature and literary criticism to be more receptive to alternative modes of cognition and expression. In the last two decades there has been a great deal of non-fiction written by sufferers about the experience of Alzheimer's disease.⁹⁷ Speaking of psychological and neurological conditions, Philip Sandblom has commented on how art and literature, produced by sufferers, has 'provided fundamental insight into certain manifestations of mental disorder, and in certain cases even help us reach a diagnosis.'⁹⁸ Art confers form and visibility on psychological or neuro-atypical processes, and Sander Gilman has described this as an act of 'seeing disease.'⁹⁹ As Ruth Nadelhaft comments, 'what can literature offer the sufferer or the bystander in the face of the endless formlessness and present tense of the experience of pain and suffering? Literature offers form, structure, and the illusion of dimension to what was out of control and without limit.'¹⁰⁰ However, as I shall go on to examine, form in subjective Alzheimer's fiction is by no means salvatory, since the task of the novelist is to approximate a progressive loss of form, a form uninhibited, as Sandblom suggests, by clinical rationality and mediating intellect—in short, an aesthetics of disarticulation. Gilman has gone on to describe psychiatric art as inherently elucidative in the sense that, unlike non-psychiatric art, it is not codified by social or literary/artistic conventions: it is characterised by 'greater linguistic richness and freedom,

⁹⁷ E.g. Robert Davis' *My Journey into Alzheimer's Disease* (1989); Diana Friel McGowin's *Living in the Labyrinth: A Personal Journey Through the Maze of Alzheimer's* (1993); Thomas DeBaggio's *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look into Life with Alzheimer's* (2002) and *When It Gets Dark: Enlightened Reflection on Life with Alzheimer's* (2003); Christine Bryden's *Dancing With Dementia: My Story of Living Positively with Dementia* (2005); Richard Taylor's *Alzheimer's From the Inside Out* (2007); Lisa Snyder's *Speaking our Minds: What It's Like to Have Alzheimer's* (2009); Norman McNamara's *More Than Words: Poems Written and Spoken by an Alzheimer's Sufferer* (2010); and John du Preez *Alzheimer's My Story: Alzheimer's Sufferer's Personal Journey and A Journey of Hope: Diary of an Alzheimer's Sufferer* (2011).

⁹⁸ Philip Sandblom, *Creativity and Disease: How Illness affects Literature, Art, and Music* (London & New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1992), p. 67.

⁹⁹ Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ruth Nadelhaft, 'The Experience of Illness' in *Imagine What It's Like: A Literature and Medicine Anthology*, ed. by Ruth Nadelhaft (USA: Maine Humanities Council, 2008), p. 3.

keener images, metaphors untrammelled by conventional logic.’¹⁰¹ However, as medically-attuned literary formalism, it also represents over-determination in literature, as both the narrative and the interpretative processes of the reader are dictated by medical nosologies and the specific symptomatology of Alzheimer’s disease. What I shall analyse is the relationship between literary erudition and clinical reasoning in narratives that contrive a jointly neurological and representational sense of affliction through use of mimetic form. I shall analyse how writers present the very narrative construction as a topography of the disease, and in turn not only offer insight into the nature of disease and acclimatise readers to strange modes of thought/speech and the people who live them, but shows the didacticism (as opposed to the elitism) in literary experimentalism, and transform reader-text relation from the *interpretative* in the literary sense to the *diagnostic* in the medical sense. Such narratives conflate logico-scientific and narrative modes of expression, clinical reasoning and literary hermeneuticism, and together represent ‘the science in narrative and the narrative in science [...] mixing two different ways of knowing (epistemologies) so that they can be integrated into a single “way of knowing.”’¹⁰²

The critical framework within which I analyse mimetic form in Alzheimer’s fiction is termed ‘narrative medicine’. Narrative medicine is gaining prominence as a field of inquiry, with many clinicians now being sensitised to the importance of narratology and *storied* experiences as guiding medical practice and perspective. Narrative medicine recognises people, specifically in moments of crisis, as *homo narrans* (as story-telling beings); it considers literature, from entire novels to short vignettes, an important diagnostic tool; and seeks to explore ‘how narratology and literariness might illuminate the clinical situation, or

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁰² James P. Meza & Daniel S. Passerman, *Integrating Narrative Medicine and Evidence-Based Medicine: The Everyday Social Practice of Healing* (London: Radcliffe Publishing Ltd., 2011), p. xiv.

what the clinical situation can reveal to the literary scholar.¹⁰³ The notion that diagnoses can be arrived at not simply through the ‘medical gaze,’ as Foucault terms it, but through literary erudition, unites the rhetorical style of literature with the biomedical rationality of the physician. Lewis Mehl-Madrona argues that ‘making a diagnosis is synonymous with constructing a story. It is an act of making meaning from isolated observations. It is a social activity,¹⁰⁴ based not on strictly empirical truths but storied experiences we accord a truth status to. Current scholarly work has stressed the importance of narrative *competence* in medical practice –what Charon defines in terms of ‘close reading, reflective writing, and bearing witness to others’ suffering.¹⁰⁵ Suffering gives rise to a bodily or corporeal hermeneutics, or what Foucault has termed ‘the *verbalization* of the pathological.’¹⁰⁶ Idiopathic etiologies are ‘propelled [...] into a narrative mode of reasoning,’ with aspects of clinical practice led by a ‘reframing of a diagnostic mystery into a narrative one.’¹⁰⁷ Narrative offers explanatory, elucidative links between cause and symptom: ‘such representations guide the clinical gaze of therapists, what they foreground and background, how they ascribe causality, who they blame or praise, and how they experience their illness.’¹⁰⁸ Lewis Mehl-Madrona comments on the humanistic role of literature in medicine, arguing that ‘medicine has progressively diminished the importance of the doctor-patient relationship, and of caring, compassion, and intent, in favour of diagnosing imaging and technical procedures.’ Mehl-Madrona goes on to describe how ‘Narrative Medicine is about revising our concept of

¹⁰³ Rita Charon, *Narrative in Healthcare: Healing Patients, Practitioners, Profession, and Community* (Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing Ltd., 2008), p. xi

¹⁰⁴ Lewis Mehl-Madrona, *Narrative Medicine: The Use of History and Story in the Healing Process* (Vermont: Bear & Company, 2007), p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1973), p. xii

¹⁰⁷ Cheryl Mattingly, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 12, No. 3, Special Collection: Rationality in the Real World: Varieties of Reasoning in Illness and Healing (Sep., 1998), pp. 273-297 (284) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/649684> [accessed 11/11/11].

¹⁰⁸ Cheryl Mattingly, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, pp. 290 & 291.

medicine to enable the incorporation of these voices into modern medicine.¹⁰⁹ However, whilst narrative medicine has gained recognition as a source of medical inquiry, some scholars are wary of it, critiquing the ‘truthfulness or accuracy of language’¹¹⁰ and arguing that narrativised, rhetorical, or discursive accounts of illness potentially misrepresent the objective, pre-discursive realities of the disease. As Vieda Skultans points out, ‘some clinicians [feel] that emphasis on patient narratives ignor[e] the complexity of medical situations and deny the physician a voice.’¹¹¹ The more conspicuous and idiosyncratic the patient’s evocation of their illness, the less apt the language is at conveying the objective truths of the disease. One criticism is that patient narratives present a potentially misleading or aberrating vision of illness, with the language used ‘seen as having a reflexive or constitutive function which rather than revealing knowledge or reality, produces or constructs that reality.’¹¹² The chapter, then, is on how the *pathologies of age* have challenged literature, inspired the creation of alternative modes of expression, and reveal an inherent pragmatism in literary experimentalism and literary erudition. Alzheimer’s disease is a subject that has united the realms of literature and medicine, and I hope to show how these disciplines are united by a desire to understand and elucidate mental and perceptual processes in Alzheimer’s patients – literature through mimetic form and medicine through developments in neurological imaging. I seek to analyse how literature can enlighten medical practice, but also how a working medical knowledge can advance the study of literature.

Chapter four discusses how aspects of longevity medicine and the commodification of immortality in discourses of consumerism have impacted the representation of time, organic decay, and death in science fiction. This chapter starts from the premise that the ‘science-

¹⁰⁹ Lewis Mehl-Madrona, Narrative Medicine, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Alex M. Carson, ‘That’s Another Story: Narrative Methods and Ethical Practice,’ *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Jun., 2001), pp. 198-202 (198) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27718706> [accessed 11/11/11]

¹¹¹ Vieda Skultans, ‘Narrative-Based Medicine’ in *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 17, No. 6 (Dec., 2001), pp. 23-24 (p. 24), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2678255> [accessed 11/11/11].

¹¹² Alex M. Carson, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, p. 198.

fictional' is now consigned to the everyday, with phrases more befitting time travel narratives coded as trite and trivial, and the reification of science fictional nova, or new things, part of a consistently evolving programme of meliorism in an ever expanding ageing populace. The science fictional is not alternative to, but deeply embedded in, our own empirical reality, and I question how the blandishments and bathetic transcendentalism of medico-consumer discourses have affected the writing and interpretation of science fiction. Whilst scholarly material on the effects of scientific/technological progressivism on science fiction is rife, there is comparatively little consideration given to the effects of prolongevity medicine and the west's litany of anti-ageing slogans/ideologies (and our habituation to them) on representations of time, organic decay, and death in science fiction. Today, consumers can avail themselves with a range of interventions, 'from various regimes and techniques of body maintenance to increasingly sophisticated medical technology, promising the prospect of erasing boundaries between chronobiology and physiological capacities in old age.'¹¹³ 'We are on the verge,' writes Michael Fossel, 'of realizing a dream we have had at least since the beginning of recorded history: the cure of ageing and age related disease.'¹¹⁴ How, and to what extent, is the empirical here-and-now of contemporary medical and scientific achievement demystifying or de-sensationalising science fiction and the Gnostic imagination? Adam Roberts argues that the 'attention of detail and the density of the described reality in many SF texts mean that, very often, they read like realist novels; or perhaps a better phrase would be pseudo-realist.'¹¹⁵ Although elements of realism pervade its own internal logic, science fictional realities must surpass scientific capability, must contain scientific impossibilities and alternative epistemologies, for it to retain its inherent transcendentalism. Whilst we are neither able to 'turn back time' nor 'defy age', postmodern

¹¹³ Pia C. Kontos, 'Multi-disciplinary Configurations in Gerontology' in *Ageing and Place: Perspectives, Policy, Practice* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p. 33

¹¹⁴ Michael Fossel, 'Reversing Human Aging' in *The Science of Anti-Aging Medicine*, ed. by Ronald Klatz & Robert Goldman (Chicago: American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, 1996), p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction*, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 15

consumer society has nevertheless passed off epistemologically suspect and empirically untenable ideas as real. Consequently, if only the level of discourse, ‘the fantastic in SF is coded as real rather than unreal.’¹¹⁶The object of this chapter is to examine how this encroaching prosaicism is affecting science fiction, and how, whilst the pathologies of ageing have sparked a creative surge in literature, prolongevity medicine and the humanist fallacy of anti-ageing are having the opposite effect. Ageing is an extraordinarily apt subject with which to study science fiction. It is a genre with an in-built obsolescence; a genre forced to confront its own waning transcendentalism and eventual terminus many times over as science fiction becomes scientific reality, and as particular nova are increasingly perceived as realistic or within the remit of scientific/medical capability. I shall use the subject of ageing to address the ways in which authors deal with the shift in science fiction from an oneiric fictional novum to an ‘increasingly widespread mode of cultural description and analysis.’¹¹⁷I shall examine how a more conventionally science-fictional parlance –expressions such as ‘turn back time’ –now typifies the everyday consumer vernacular, and will argue that the secular optimism of anti-ageing and our habituation to notions of defying or reversing time not only render science fictional nova far more quotidian, but bring some time travel narratives closer to postmodern discourses of ageing. I shall argue that there is a body of earlier literature that might be considered proto-postmodern texts of ageing. These include: Oscar Wilde’s philosophical fiction *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), as a text about the wiles of perpetual youth; F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (1922), as a text about backwards ageing; and Virginia Woolf’s parodic biography *Orlando* (1928) as a text as much about a triumph over biography as anatomy. However, the primary texts I shall examine in this chapter, including Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Michel

¹¹⁶ J. Timothy Bagwell, *Intersections: Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. by George E. Slusser et al. (USA: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 41.

¹¹⁷ Veronica Hollinger, ‘Science Fiction and Postmodernism’ in *A Companion to Science Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), pp. 232-48 (p. 233).

Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), are characterised by the representation of environments resistant to periodisation –that is, betwixt and between past and future, antiquity and futurity –and characters existing on both sides of the divides aged/ageless, young/old. I will examine how far these novels' semiology of age and representation of time (both historical and bodily) are germane to contemporary consumer and medical discourses of ageing.

Recent scholarship has stressed the science fictional in consumer, biomedical, and gerontological discourses. In consumer discourses, ageing is not presented as natural, but liberticidal –as an affront to, and destruction of, liberty. Jay Sokolovsky remarks how 'consumer culture places a strong emphasis upon the body and body maintenance' and how 'the active cultivation of youthful lifestyles, including the potential to renew and transform the body.' He moves onto comment how in Anglo-American culture the body is perceived as 'renewable, and ageing as something which can be held at bay and even "defeated" through purchase, hard work and dedication.'¹¹⁸ Sociologist Andrew Blaikie has asked whether it is 'more normal [...] to grow old naturally, or, conversely, to conform to convention and attempt to defy or disguise such a process?'¹¹⁹ In a similar vein, sociologist Simon Biggs comments on how, in consumer culture, '[a] multiplicity of options present themselves without shape or coherence –a belief in the possibility of avoiding the "old" traps through an assumption of agelessness.'¹²⁰ Consumer culture provides individuals with 'permutational possibilities',¹²¹ towards the creation of a self-generative, potentially ageless identity. In a postmodern spin on Pound's dictum 'make it new', consumer society has conferred a far more radical uncertainty

¹¹⁸ Jay Sokolovsky, *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives* (USA: Praeger Publishers, 2009), p. 141

¹¹⁹ Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1999), p. 87

¹²⁰ Simon Biggs, 'The "Blurring" of the Lifecourse: Narrative, Memory and the Question of Authenticity' in *Journal of Aging and Identity*, vol. 4, No. 4 (1999), pp. 209-221 [211].

¹²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 27.

on age identities, as ageing consumers, revelling in the illusion of ‘creative autonomy’,¹²² from age and its vicissitudes, enter a more adolescent crisis of identity. Biggs comments that discourses of ageing today involve a ‘rejection of deterministic narratives in favour of the elder as a consumer of more youthful lifestyle choices.’¹²³ In all its postmodern recyclability, the elderly are adopting attitudes and lifestyles more conventionally associated with the young: ‘fixed conceptions of ageing have, for many, been replaced by a much more fluid notion of later life as a period of experiment with a diversity of activities and identities.’¹²⁴ In a similar vein, Ian Rees Jones comments that ‘it is no longer appropriate to categorise people entering later life as a homogenous group of “retirees”, “third-agers” or indeed “pensioners”’. Instead, post-working life is based around a variety of lifestyles, uncertainties, anxieties and aspirations.’¹²⁵ Consumer culture, as Jean Baudrillard describes, provides the ‘veils which, happily, protect us from the objective illusion, the illusion of truth, from the transparent relation of the world to an objective truth, from the transparent relation of man to his own truth’¹²⁶ –mortality. Anti-ageing products offer the illusion of regaining one’s youth, or the illusion or ‘assumption’ of agelessness ‘we want this immortality here and now, this real-time afterlife,’ argues Jean Baudrillard, ‘without having resolved the problem of the end.’¹²⁷ With recourse to the aforementioned literature, I ask how the commodification of immortality, and its apparent crude attainability and bathetic, secularised, and egoistic appropriation in consumer culture has impacted science fiction –a genre, after all that ‘distinguishes its fictional worlds to one degree or another from the world we actually live in: a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality, a fantastic literature.’¹²⁸ This prescient, future-

¹²² Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: The Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 46

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²⁴ Biggs, *Journal of Aging and Identity*, p. 211

¹²⁵ Ian Rees Jones et al., *Ageing in a Consumer Society: From Passive to Active Consumption in Britain* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2008), p. 114.

¹²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), p. 94.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹²⁸ Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction*, p. 1.

orientated genre has in recent decades had to confront the prospect of its own obsolescence and growing prosaicism as medical and scientific developments have to increasing extents reified science fiction's earlier conceptual, or imaginative, realities. However, with anti-ageing the challenge presented to science fiction is on more of a linguistic and conceptual level: that is, whilst anti-ageing dominates aspects of medical practice and bio-gerontological research, its greatest impact can be found on the level of language –that is, from slogans and their encroachment upon consumer verbal habits/expectations and the broader cultural parlance.

The primary focus in this chapter is on the role of science fiction in the context both of the contemporary cultural sophism and humanist fallacy anti-ageing and its antecedent medical literature outlined in this introduction. The central contestation in this chapter is that science fiction is destabilised, de-sensationalised, as much by present as historical discourses on ageing –and in particular by the realist and positivist connotations present anti-ageing discourses gain by virtue of immortality and rejuvenation's consistent presence in medicine throughout history. A key feature of this chapter is the apparent affinity between the postulated future cultures imagined by science fiction and antecedent medical literature on the subject of rejuvenation –united, that is, by their 'obsess[ion] with transcending the body and achieving immortality.'¹²⁹ There has been much scholarly work on the ways in which contemporary scientific/cultural advances have rendered science fiction more quotidian. However, where my chapter differs is in the consideration of how science fiction is de-sensationalised as much by the past as the present: that is, by the medical and scientific legacies of antiquity. I want to consider the affinity between the science-fictional parlance and historical medical discourse on prolongevity and rejuvenation. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this introduction, anti-ageing ideologies and ideas of immortality define no

¹²⁹ Gary Westfahl, *The Science of Fiction and the Fiction of Science: Collected Essays on SF Storytelling and the Gnostic Imagination* (USA: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), p. 7.

one particular chronological period, and because of the diachronic character of what is now termed ‘anti-ageing’, its appropriation in, or indeed *as*, as science-fictional discourse is inherently problematic. With the subject of immortality and defying age, the future-orientated nature of this genre is challenged –de-sensationalised and rendered more prosaic not by present-day science and the actualisation of its postulated futures but by the medical and scientific legacies of antiquity. However, perhaps the ultimate challenge for science fiction, and literature more generally, is representing age, be it youth, adolescence, middle age, or old age, in the context of a culture adroitly resisting the realities of age through ‘marketing strategies aimed at “ageless” consumers’¹³⁰ –in a culture, as Baudrillard describes, ‘attempt[ing] to construct an entirely positive world, a perfect world, expurgated of every illusion, of every sort of evil and negativity, exempt from death itself.’¹³¹

Historically, western culture has offered the ageing individual a regimen of dietary, hygienic, surgical, cosmetic, and biochemical interventions. It is a period of life that has undergone radical change as medicine and science have developed. As such a clear, uncontested definition of old age, in both contemporary and historical cultures, remains powerfully elusive, and despite many of the prejudicial attitudes and negative stereotypes that still persist, ageing remains a powerful force for change and innovation in literature –one that places demands on readership, language, literary formalism, genre, and disciplinary boundaries. In a postmodern spin on Pound’s dictum ‘make it new’, ageing is both a plaintive and deeply innovative subject in contemporary literature –one that that places demands on readership, language, literary formalism, and genre –and thus it offers a new paradigm of hope for an increasingly aged culture. Paradoxical though it is, what I argue pervades the

¹³⁰ Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (USA: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 6.

¹³¹ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Murder of the Real’ in *The Vital Illusion*, ed. by Julia Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 67.

literature of ageing is a semiotics of immortality. The literature of ageing is most resistant to binary thinking, implicitly conflating young and old, mortal and sempiternal, the plaintive and the transcendent, and gerontological and trans-/posthumanist discourse. Whilst thematically each text offers an unproblematic address to the subject of ageing, the very *language*, and in some cases the literary or aesthetic formalism, that is employed by these authors liberates the characters from or permits them to transcend the limitations and pathos of age that prevails or is imposed upon them *thematically*. In each chapter I shall examine how the formal features of the literature of age are at odds with its thematic preoccupation, and how, like the medical interventions or cosmetic deceptions we have grown so familiar with, the very language intervenes on the fate of the characters. Indeed, what we find in a great deal of contemporary age narratives is that the technical innovations, the poeticisation of prose style, abstract self-referentiality, suggestive symbolism, and the semantic open-endedness of rhetorical as opposed to medical accounts of age, are all inherently salvatory. From the works of Beckett to post-2000 Alzheimer's fiction I shall discuss how contemporary literature offers a semiology and language of decay that subsumes and equates itself with its antitheses: discourses of youth, rejuvenation, and sempiternity. I shall analyse how counterrealist thinking is implicit in traditional realist narratives of ageing, and how the very language and semiology of ageing implicitly denies, precludes, or even *inverts* the canonical indices of decay, decline, and death, or plunges them into a counterintuitive latency—indeed has already achieved what medicine has dreamt of for generations and what it still strives toward: the disinvention of age.

IRRESISTIBLE ENTROPY: THE AESTHETICS OF FAILURE AND THE COMPULSION TO INCAPACITY IN THE WORKS OF SAMUEL BECKETT

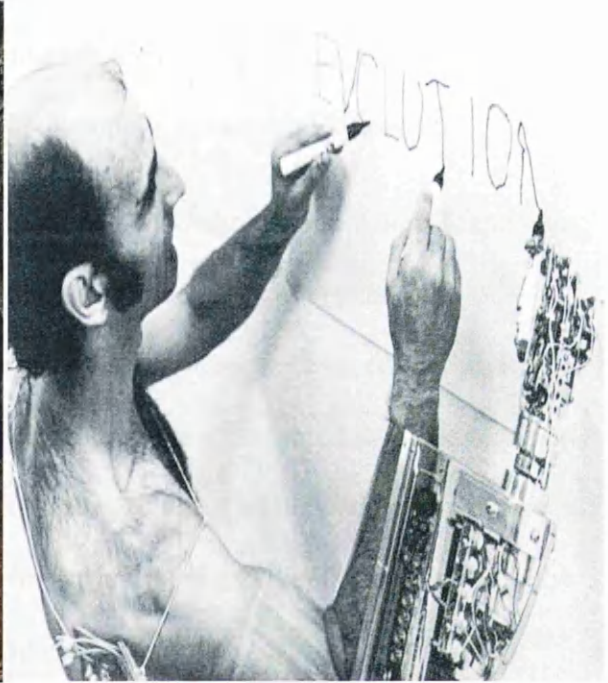


Fig. 1 Otto Dix, 'The Scat Players' (1920) Fig. 2 Stelarc, 'Evolution' (1982)

'The Scat Players' (1920) by German Expressionist/Dada artist Otto Dix (fig. 1) depicts degradation, incapacity, and death in wartime. The grotesqueness of the figures' deficiencies, contortions, and prostheses, combined with the apparatuses that surround them, give these disabled veterans both a Shelleyan monstrosity and Dadaist grotesqueness. However, this anti-war painting represents a heightened, if distorted, image of disability and mortality at the same time it does fantastical, technologised, and potentially *immortal* bodies. The technological annexations that comprise these obscure bodies represent a jointly brutalising and salvatory force. The veterans are at once menaced and immortalised by these technological adjuncts, and it is unclear whether they are victims of war, with the prostheses as a benign, commemorative monuments to lost limbs; or victims of *technology*, with the allusions to war framing an anti-technological critique. Fifty years prior to Dix's painting, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in 'Works and Days' (1870):

Our nineteenth century is the age of tools. They grow out of our structure [...] The magazine of inventions, the patent-office, where are the models from which every hint was taken. All the tools and engines on earth are only extensions of its limbs and senses [...] Machines can only second, not supply, his unaided senses.¹³²

The world of technology for Emerson is, or should be, an anthropocentric one. Technology, for Emerson, should not supplant or replace the human body, or even enhance it, for enhancement predicates insufficiency or limitation in that which is being enhanced. Rather, it should aid or ‘second’ the body, and in both design and use –should reflect the human body back sycophantically at the individual, like Narcissus beguiled by his own specular double. Emerson conveys a cautionary attitude to technological Man and the idea of extending the body and allowing oneself to ‘experienc[e] the world through an artifact, a technology’¹³³ –a mediated existence, highlighting both the thrilling and threatening duplicability of the body. This anxiety is reflected in Dix’s painting, as we see the body burdened with prostheses and having lost all referential status. ‘Each man has injuries that could not possibly be survived and wears fantastic prostheses,’¹³⁴ and as such technology seems both a palliative and suggestively adversarial force, meliorating these figures’ physical injuries in the same instance it inflicts them. The figures’ prostheses offer both a utopian and dystopian image of the technology and its relation to the human body: utopian, in the sense that technology is subordinated to the body, and can be use to lessen human suffering and substitute loss; and dystopian in the sense that the body becomes subordinated to technology, ‘converting the worker into a living appendage of the machine’¹³⁵ as Karl Marx writes in *Capital* (1867-94). Clearly the technologisation of Man has both positive and negative connotations, both bound

¹³² Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Chapter 7: Works and Days’ in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Society and Solitude*, vol. VII (USA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 79.

¹³³ Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technology* (London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. xi.

¹³⁴ Carol Poore, ‘Disability in the Culture of the Weimar Republic’ in *Disability in Twentieth Century German Culture* (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 30.

¹³⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 503.

inextricably with humanistic concerns. The introduction of technology into the body predicates transcendence of the constitutively fragile body. This is implied in some of the work of transhumanist artist Stelarc (Fig. 2) who views technological prostheses in terms of expansion and extension rather than substitution, surrogacy, and lack. However, Dix does not depict humans advanced by technology, but a company of machinic uncannies –veterans lost amongst a superabundance of apparatuses. As such, technology also signifies oppression, expendability, a utilitarian view of human life and, more politically, subordination to Germany’s insistence of war –what Carol Poore describes as ‘the war *machine* [my italics].’¹³⁶

This chapter starts from the premise that the technologisation of Man is anti-humanistic, and moves on to view ageing in the twentieth century not in terms of the failure of the body but of the success of technology. In this chapter I approach the subjects of ageing and organic decay through the philosophical study of technology. I propose Dix’s ‘The Scat Players’ as *the* image of contemporary ageing. It is comparable to Paul Virilio’s description of technological Man, and the irresistible sedentariness we are beguiled into through the presence of self-substituting devices: ‘prostheses that make the super-equipped able-bodied person almost the exact equivalent of the motorized and wired disabled person.’¹³⁷ In the painting, the figures’ sensoria are rendered visible and extraneous to the body, and each figure is overcome by a series of complex, maladroit, and demonstrably needless apparatuses. The process of exhuming the body’s invisible, visceral geographies, although linked implicitly to wounding, might relate to epistemological changes in medicine from the development of perceptual technologies such as the X-ray: ‘the body could be penetrated by a barrage of devices: the

¹³⁶ Poore, p. 32.

¹³⁷ Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans by. Julie Rose (London & New York: Verso, 1997), p. 11.

stethoscope, ophthalmoscope, laryngoscope, speculum, high-intensity light, [and] X-rays.¹³⁸

The atomization of Dix's bodies does not simply convey injury and decapitation in wartime, but the changing nature and *depth* of knowledge about the body, and the rendering of specific senses such as hearing, sight, and touch, more conspicuous and external by technology. As Diana Riccò comments:

machines have progressively developed the acquired capacities of the *perception* of sensory data. [...] Nowadays, as a consequence of research in the fields of science information, cybernetics, robots, and more particularly artificial intelligence, the two partners –human and machine –sometimes look interchangeable.¹³⁹

Each figure in Dix's painting seems more like an appendix to a machine than a human being. Technology, in this painting, isolates and externalises the body's senses and functions, and thus we gain no impression of the *totality* of the body, but the body, instead, as a series of occlusions with each constituent part functioning independently. Technology is a malign rather than salvatory force, and the prostheses not corrective or palliative, but superfluous, untranscendent, and menacing. The figures' injuries and disabilities are inflicted not so much through war and violence as by the 'rendering of the boundaries between [...] corporeality and technology threateningly and thrillingly permeable.'¹⁴⁰ The bodies in the painting are debased, lateralised, and abject spectacles, and instead of elevating the figures from their constitutively fragile bodies, the technological prostheses simply recapitulate aspects of their corporeality: notably, the innate weakness and penetrability of the body. The painting offers a sense of victimisation and (self-)destruction through a disturbing sense of needless or

¹³⁸ Tim Armstrong, 'Prosthetic Modernism' in *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 2.

¹³⁹ Diana Riccò, 'Artificial Sensory Perception: Vicarious Technologies for Synaesthesia' in *Mediating the Human Body: Technology, Communication, and Fashion* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2003), p. 177.

¹⁴⁰ Laura Salisbury, 'Linguistic Trepanation: Brain Damage, Penetrative Seeing, and a Revolution of the Word' in *Minds, Bodies, Machines, 1770-1930*, ed. by Deidre Coleman and Hilary Fraser (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 179-209 (p.180-1).

enforced reliance, and as Jacques Derrida remarks of the typewriter in *Paper Machine*, reminds us that humanity is “in danger,” particularly of being downgraded by the machine.’¹⁴¹

In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud wrote ‘Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic god. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times.’¹⁴² It is this ‘trouble’ that this chapter, like Dix’s painting, is concerned with. The permeation of technology has clear existential imputations which are highlighted in Dix’s painting, namely that the technologisation of Man does not presuppose transcendence in a trans- or posthumanist vein, but is brutalising –tantamount to a self-crafted, self-perpetuating obsolescence, or even death. Dix shows that whilst technology and prostheses can enhance and extend the body, they also highlight the in-built obsolescence and threatening permeability of the body –in which sense it is not technology but luddism that is salvatory, as is perhaps implied by Emerson. Thus the technologisation of Man also becomes a powerful and candid admission of the *frailty* of the human form and, ultimately, that it ‘should be replaced by another entity better suited for the pressing challenges imposed by an environment that is ever more strongly conditioned by new technologies.’¹⁴³ With this argument in mind, what I shall be arguing in this chapter is that with technological innovation and intervention, old age becomes less a process of inexorable bodily decline, and more a condition of Man’s own contrivance. Through the increasing dependence upon technology, Mankind wilfully and calculatingly ‘retires’ the body, and lapses into a self-fashioned

¹⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 19.

¹⁴² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., general editor James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press & the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1953-73), p. xxi, 86-92.

¹⁴³ Tomás Maldonado, ‘The Body: Artificialization and Transparency’ in *Mediating the Human Body*, p. 18.

pseudo-senescence –or what Virilio has described as ‘*citizen-terminal*.’¹⁴⁴ It is in this vein that I argue technological discourses inevitably and unavoidably implicate gerontological ones, with the various indices of decay and decline and conventionally associated with ageing typifying technological Man. Technological progress renders the body infelicitous –an obstacle or impediment that must be overcome –and the individual a ‘mere intelligence fastened to a dying animal.’¹⁴⁵ It is within this context that I study the subject of age in the works of Samuel Beckett. In this chapter I seek to examine how the works of Samuel Beckett advance the philosophical study of technology in the context I have placed it. I shall discuss the relationship between technological and gerontological discourses through an analysis of the ageing/victimisation nexus in the prose and dramaturgy of Beckett. I use Beckett’s work because, firstly, ageing is narrated with a sense of subjection or affliction, and secondly, because organic decay is rarely depicted as a natural, normal, unconditioned process. I will analyse representations of inertia, fatigability, anarchic bodily sensations, wordlessness/inaudibility, self-alienation, decrepitude, discreation, and loss of self-sovereignty in selected works. For Beckett’s characters, to senesce is not to acquiesce to natural forces and bodily inclinations, but to be afflicted suddenly, and perhaps even temporarily, by a malign, arbitrary imposition –at the heart of which, I argue, is the image of the machine. Although anachronistic, this chapter seeks to provide insight into the ways in which a 21st century audience/reader can re-read Beckett’s choreographic, scenic, and linguistic sparseness, plus his characters’ estrangement from their bodily functions (and even body parts) and all that is natural, as an allegorical critique of the mediating and substitutive presence of technology in our lives –and more specifically the many absences that it entails. It is the intention of this chapter not to impose a meaning on the Beckett canon, rather to

¹⁴⁴ Virilio, *Open Sky*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁵ W.B Yeats, cited by Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (London: University of California Press Ltd., 1973), p. 124.

contribute thought into what additional meanings and interpretations Beckettian austerity and strangeness gains with changing cultural contexts.

i) Dramaturgical Bodies

Inertia, enfeeblement, abjectness, strangeness, nomadism, and a disregard for causality are a few characteristics in the Beckett canon that this chapter will examine. To view Samuel Beckett as the laureate of ageing in 20th century literature would not make for a particularly novel or contentious reading of his works. ‘The impact of time and ageing on the characters/actors,’ writes Khaled Besbes ‘is immediately recognizable,’¹⁴⁶ yet at the same time Beckett’s depiction of age –or conditions conventionally associated with old age –also subtly repudiate the realities of ageing. The themes of victimisation and subjection (i.e., of being under domination, control, or influence), and allusions to technology or anthropomorphic machines, are all salient characteristics underpinning Beckett’s description of old age. Far from being acquired naturally, his characters seem *subjected* to various age-associated ailments and conditions, and senesce in a suggestively artificial, often maladroit and histrionic manner –as if not through biological failure, but through premature intervention or some malevolent, celestial or inquisitorial force. Michael Worton comments that ‘time indubitably exists as a force of which the characters are aware in that they become increasingly decrepit, but they have no sense of its *continuity*.’¹⁴⁷ The characters are aware of the inexorable passage of time and its effects on their bodies; but far from a natural, *organic* process of decline they senesce in a putatively unnatural, sudden, and profoundly alienating manner. Indeed, *to age* in the Beckett canon, is a compulsion, a form of mania or self-abuse,

¹⁴⁶ Khaled Besbes, *The Semiotics of Beckett’s Theatre: A Semiotic Study of the Complete Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett* (Florida: Universal Publishers, 2007), p. 191

¹⁴⁷ Michael Worton, ‘Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. by John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 67-88 (p.73).

and occasionally represented choreographically in complete inertia or alternatively a series of serio-comic, spasmodic affectations on the parts of the characters –as if their bodies are endowed with a malignant sentience compelling them to senesce. This may be a hyperbolic rendering of the body’s predisposition *to* age and the sense of forced or reluctant acquiescence to the nihilating effects of time. In much of Beckett’s prose, particularly *Molloy* (1950) and *The Unnamable* (1952), the use of the pronouns ‘they’, ‘them’, ‘he’, and ‘she’ –to whom no character is assigned –personify these temporal forces; and likewise Beckett’s stagecraft and directorial suggestions stultify his characters, render them speechless, inert, or discombobulated in a tragicomic sense.

Ageing in Beckett’s *oeuvre* is not a condition of the body, but an affliction linked, in his prose, to Beckett’s own disobligation, as author, to create –to *animate* his characters –and in his dramaturgy, Beckett’s directorial decisions and the tormentful machinations of the theatre. Ageing is a theatrical contrivance, not biological but *situational*, and in his prose, in a similar vein, seems not biological but *authorial* in origin: the anatomical is indistinguishable, or at least implicated in, the dramaturgical and authorial in the same way the body in *Lessness* (1970) blurs into the ruins of the surrounding milieu:

Slow black with ruin true refuge four walls over backwards no sound. legs a single
block arms fast to sides little body face to endlessness [...] Only upright little body
grey smooth no relief a few holes.¹⁴⁸

The malign external forces in his prose and dramaturgy coerce the protagonists into acting, or *not* acting, and even compel their bodies to senesce. Beckettian bodies become sites where exogenous and endogenous forces converge, and consequently the pronouns ‘I’, ‘me’ and the possessive ‘my’ are treated with great hesitancy and scepticism: ‘[b]ut enough of this cursed

¹⁴⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Lessness* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970), pp. 10-11.

first person, it is really too red a herring, [...] Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it. Matter of habit. To be adjusted later.’¹⁴⁹ The fact that all of his characters age, and demonstrate an often obsessive preoccupation with the nature of mortality, serves to substantiate the *existence* of their bodies –which, in works such as *Breath, Play, Happy Days*, and *The Unnamable*, is under some doubt –and secondly the relative *normality* of their bodies –both of which are under scrutiny in his immensely aporetic art. However, it is problematic to assume that the characters’ decrepitude is in any way an admission of their *mortality*, and likewise a misconception to think that the universality of ageing makes Beckett’s anti-heroes some of the most identifiable in 20th century literature. Many of Beckett’s works give a sense not of a natural but coercive, perennial senescence, and the characters rarely act through their bodies with tacit self-command, but operate their limbs inexpertly and maladroitly as if they are mechanisms or apparatuses. Ageing is often linked to a sense of subjection, victimisation, or even sadomasochism, and consequently the theme of ageing is saturated with allusions to optionality or cessation, lending a wry defeatism to his characters’ plights and a latent congeniality to ‘anti-ageing’ discourses (the hallmark of which is that ageing is optional). Ageing, in Beckett’s works, is something at once intrinsic/internal to and imposed on (or external to) the body –or as is more succinctly captured in *Watt* (1953): ‘[e]verything that happened happened *inside* it, and at the same time everything that happened *outside* it [*my italics*].’¹⁵⁰

In *The Unnamable* this sense of coercion is not always linked to organic decay but mechanical production:

Why don’t they wash their hands of me and set me free? [...] Perhaps then I could go silent, for good and all. [...] All this business of a labour to accomplish, before I can

¹⁴⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder Publications, 1994), p. 345.

¹⁵⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Jupiter Books, 1963), pp. 41-2.

end, of words to say, a truth to recover, in order to say it, before I can end, of an imposed task, once known, long neglected, finally forgotten [...] I have to speak, whatever that means, having nothing to say, no words but the words of others [...] Nothing can exempt me from it.¹⁵¹

His ‘habitual utterance’¹⁵² represents a compulsion to act (i.e., to do or to speak), or in some cases a compulsion *not* to act. For instance, in *Molloy* –a comic, Beckettian adaptation of the detective genre –the protagonist is compelled to seek his mother, just as Malone is to seek Molloy; the narrator in *The Unnamable* is compelled to speak with an automatised incessantness ‘with this voice that is not mine,’¹⁵³ just as Winnie is driven to loquacity and perpetual self-address in *Happy Days* (1961); Krapp is committed obsessively to his phonic self-memorialisations; the figures encased in urns in *Play* are commanded to talk by spotlights; and in *Waiting for Godot* (1952), a play speaking deterministically about ‘the continuing futility of mankind,’¹⁵⁴ Vladimir and Estragon are compelled to wait:

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let’s go.

[*They do not move*].¹⁵⁵

As readers/spectators we do not know whether these characters act under *compulsion*, which has a physical or psychological locus, or *command*, which implies external agency. His characters are dispossessed of a will, and on occasion a voice, and become the obliterated, narrative property of some unidentified, clandestine character. As well as a compulsion to act, his characters’ plights and physical, psychological, or situational traumas also represent

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 316.

¹⁵² Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 263.

¹⁵³ *Trilogy*, p. 309.

¹⁵⁴ Mel Gussow in *Conversations With (and about) Samuel Beckett* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1996), p. 139.

¹⁵⁵ Samuel Beckett, ‘Waiting for Godot’ in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (Kent: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 203.

subjection to an act (i.e., Beckett's own dramatic works). His characters are afflicted by an inability to *do*, which seems as much a consequence of physical decomposition as Beckett's authorial disobligations and successive de-theatricalisations. Beckett delimits the actors' interpretative liberties and creative deviations by 'relentlessly demand[ing] that his actors and actresses control their body accurately like a machine.'¹⁵⁶ Moreover, comparing theatre to prose, Beckett also states that he likes 'the limitations of theatre as compared to the non-limitations of prose. I turned to theatre as relief –from the blackness of prose [...] Then it became its own darkness.'¹⁵⁷ Beckett's art is to some degree, then, eschatological in the sense that his theatre –his characters' world –is, like their bodies, coming to an end. Rather than being domesticated and enformed by the necessities of plot, character development, structure, specificity of scene and environment, and literary subjectivism, it emerges out of the very *lack* of all this. His theatre is, ostensibly, in the extremes of deprivation; it is produced out of its very antithesis, anti-theatre, and pivots exhaustedly and stoically around a non-event, represented moments of speechlessness, inertia, and scenic and choreographic austerity. John Calder comments that many 'giv[e] way to apathy, treating art as an escape from reality, a comfortable, insulated world' and that Beckett's necrotic minimalism is a compulsion in itself: 'Aesthetically, he needed to suffer pain.'¹⁵⁸ His characters senesce, then, out of a jointly physical and directorial/aesthetic constrictiveness, which makes his representation of age fissured –that is, both endemic and external to the body. Beckett's ascetic art lends itself to ageing, or even models itself on the characters' senescing bodies. Biologically and dramaturgically we witness a conjoint sense of depletion and necrosis, with the possibility of inexistence immanent or, paradoxically, even present: both Beckett's theatre and Beckett's bodies seem to be rehearsing their own insufficiencies and eventual demise, whilst the

¹⁵⁶ Yoshiki Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 42.

¹⁵⁷ Samuel Beckett, quoted by Mel Gussow in *Conversations With (and about) Samuel Beckett*, p. 32.

¹⁵⁸ John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder Publications UK Ltd., 2001), p. 3.

frequent moments of wordlessness, changelessness, and stasis give the impression of endlessness, of being constructed *out of time*.

In *Act Without Words I* (1956) the character is ‘flung backwards on stage’¹⁵⁹ repeatedly by an invisible force as he attempts to flee the stage. The boundlessness and featurelessness of the desert is complemented by the characteristic austerity of Beckett’s theatre space. However the scene is in conflict with the intimacy of the theatre and, spatially, its limitations –which Beckett comically reminds us of each time the character is thrown back on stage. The character reluctantly inhabits the stage, during which time several items descend –three boxes, a pair of scissors, and a pitcher labelled ‘water’ –but ‘the spectator, together with the stage figure, does not succeed in discovering any causality in the events, which are interrelated only by a time sequence.’¹⁶⁰ The play is a parable of subjection and resignation, and the play’s intertextual link with the Tantalus myth provides *Act Without Words I* a deterministic quality as the fate of the unnamed character is preimposed: ‘having displeased the gods, Tantalus was condemned to be “tantalized” eternally by a spring from which he could not slack his thirst, and by a tree whose fruit was always beyond his reach.’¹⁶¹ The man is not simply condemned to centre stage but divested of a voice as well a name, and is tantalised by intractable objects. Even if they did not disappear, these objects would be ineffectual. For instance, the elusive tree from which he intends to hang himself folds up, ‘close[s] like a parasol’¹⁶² –as if Beckett, with a tragicomic metatheatricality, is using the mimetic space of the theatre to taunt the character or remind him of his subjection. Rendering the tree comically and candidly two-dimensional also reminds the audience of the incongruity of the tree in a barren desert, or alternatively, in its conspicuous artifice and elusiveness –its

¹⁵⁹ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 203.

¹⁶⁰ Shimon Levy, *Samuel Beckett’s Self-Referential Drama: The Sensitive Chaos* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), p. 37

¹⁶¹ Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 218.

¹⁶² Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 203

hallucinogenic properties borne from the character's desperate desire for respite, initially from the sun and then from life. What we are presented with is a necrotic minimalism, where the character is forced into inertia and resignation by the disappearance of what few props comprised the set. The result of being 'tantalised' by elusive objects is that he has 'learned *not* to use his hands, in defiance of whistled temptations.'¹⁶³ The critics Ruby Cohn and S.E. Gontarski have interpreted victory at this point of cessation: '[a] conscious rebellion, a deliberate, wilful refusal to obey.'¹⁶⁴ However, this may just as easily be interpreted as conditioned inactivity, with the objects' intractability revealing nothing but dependency –he is, as Shimon Levy comments, '[u]nable to live without the help of external objects.'¹⁶⁵ The play, then, is about the inability to *do*, a parable of the illusion of competence and potency in an object-strewn world, and a painful and candid reminder the *incompetence* and impotency that we are forced to confront in the absence of the objects that enable us: '[h]is immobility is, finally, willed' with the removal of the objects, and he is 'inadequately created or adapted to deal with hostile environmental forces. He is pathetic; born, indeed created to fail, a caged rat frustrated by an inept or malicious handler.'¹⁶⁶ At points throughout the play, he sits meditatively in a half-contented domiciliary inertia, or in the throes of puzzlement, 'look[ing] at his hands.'¹⁶⁷ He is the image here of Kenner's Cartesian man who, without his apparatuses or accessories, is 'a mere intelligence fastened to a dying animal' –or, in this case, a wantonly dying animal.

In *Play* (1963), we are presented with a similar sense of subjection. It opens with the directions:

¹⁶³ Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 219.

¹⁶⁴ S.E. Gontarski, "Birth Astride of a Grave": Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words I* in *The Beckett Studies Reader* (USA: University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 32.

¹⁶⁵ Levy, *Beckett's Self-Referential Drama*

¹⁶⁶ Gontarski, pp. 31/30.

¹⁶⁷ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 206

*Front centre, touching one another, three identical grey urns about one yard high. From each a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn's mouth. The heads are those, from left to right as seen from auditorium, of W2, M, and W1. They face undeviatingly front throughout the play. Faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns. But no mask. Their speech is provoked by a spotlight projected on faces alone.*¹⁶⁸

The characters are prompted into speech by inquisitorial spotlight. They 'become animated (not only lively in their behaviour but literally brought to life out of their torpor) when light shines on them; their words, we feel are extracted from them by the light as a sort of torture.'¹⁶⁹ The lights are both a life-giving and purgatorial force, and as such Beckett conjoins creation and destruction. The play is the ultimate diminishment of theatrical action and dramaturgical energy and flair; the 'performers [...] have to subdue their theatricality'¹⁷⁰ –as Beckett describes: '*faces impassive throughout. Voices toneless except where an expression is indicated [...] Voices faint, largely unintelligible.*'¹⁷¹ Beckett curtails the creative liberties and deviations of the actors: their contribution to the theatre must, in this play, reside not in expression and theatrical élan, but in the accretion of detail –towards discreation, if you will. As Joanne Shaw comments: '[f]or Beckett, making can never be isolated from not-making or not being able to make,'¹⁷² and this is certainly implicit in his artistic direction, as Jean Martin describes: 'Beckett does not want his actors to act. He wants them to do only what he tells them. When they try to act, he becomes very angry.'¹⁷³ This seems fundamental to *Play* as well as to *Act Without Words I*; they are plays where action cannot be disengaged from inaction, and where the creative act of producing theatre is bound

¹⁶⁸ 'Play' in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 307.

¹⁶⁹ Shaw, p. 69.

¹⁷⁰ Cohn, p. 282.

¹⁷¹ 'Play' in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 307.

¹⁷² Joanne Shaw, 'Introduction' in *Impotence and Making in Samuel Beckett's Trilogy* (The Netherlands: Editions Rodopi, 2010), p. 7

¹⁷³ Jean Martin, quoted by Michael Worton in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, p. 67.

up in its very antithesis: ‘total impotence.’¹⁷⁴ The restriction that the actors are subject to is analogous to that in *Happy Days*. Martha Fehsenfeld describes playing the part of Winnie:

The eyes were, of course, of enormous importance in this act. The side gazes required a use of the eye muscles in an intense, highly concentrated manner. Everything was narrowed in, contained, right. All my responses were limited to the strongest possible kinds of reaction, which were then registered on my face. The ritual was so closely observed, often unbearably so. I have never felt my body so confined and my mind so active simultaneously.¹⁷⁵

However, when we look at Billie Whitelaw’s description of performing in a production of *Play* it is evident that not even this economy of theatrical expression is permitted. She describes how Beckett ‘wanted the effect of the face disintegrating like the urns,’ and adds that the makeup ‘was a mixture of porridge oats, cruder oats, oatmeal, mixed with liquefied jelly and surgical glue [...] As this stuff dried, it stuck to your face like a crazy face pack and as you spoke, bits of it flicked off our faces.’¹⁷⁶ In a manner that is comparable to *What Where* (1983) where each character is ‘as alike as possible. Same Long grey gown. Same long grey hair,’¹⁷⁷ in *Play* Beckett restricts the actors’ movements, makes them indivisible from the scenery and indistinguishable, physically and vocally, from each other, and, using the spotlights, determines when and for how long each speaks –the spotlights even ‘sometimes interrupts mid-phrase, and [they] seem compelled to repeat in order to continue.’¹⁷⁸ Technology, just like Beckett’s artistic direction, is not a reciprocating, congenial presence in this play; it controls but does not facilitate the action, it enables but is

¹⁷⁴ John Calder, ‘The Failure of Art’, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder Publications, 2001), p. 81.

¹⁷⁵ Martha Fehsenfeld, ‘From the Perspective of an Actress/Critic’ in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett*, ed. by Katherine H. Burkman (London and Toronto: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987), p. 54.

¹⁷⁶ Billie Whitelaw, quoted by Ulrika Maude in *Beckett, Technology, and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 108-9.

¹⁷⁷ Beckett, ‘What Where’, in *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 469

¹⁷⁸ Cohn, p. 283.

central to this negligent, necrotic art: ‘And now, that you are...mere eye. Just looking. At my face. On and off [...] Mere eye. No mind. Opening and shutting on me. I am as much –’,¹⁷⁹ The characters’ verbiage is provoked by the spotlights, as if desperately and exhaustively obliging a malevolent, dictatorial force –or maybe this simply represents life in the age of mechanical reproduction, ‘re-imagining creation in the age of the machine.’¹⁸⁰ Here the characters are controlled and impeded by technology; but this very notion is problematised by the fact that electricity, which powers the spotlights, is a fundamental part of the characters’ (and everyone’s) bodies in the central nervous system. Given that technology –or more specifically, electricity –is the necrotizing force in this play, insufficiently illuminating the stage and precluding a complete, coherent narrative, it must also follow that humans – humanity, even –are the necrotic, destructive force behind this theatre. In the symbolic equivalence struck between the antagonistic, inquisitorial spotlights –‘the character’s enemy’¹⁸¹ –and the central nervous system and life-giving properties of the body, Beckett juxtaposes the creative and destructive, and the characters are quickly transformed from victims to perpetrators, or more accurately they are both simultaneously –which may resonate with post-war minds. They are antagonised by technology but more disturbingly are indistinguishable from and even created out of it, which calls to mind Otto Dix’s ‘The Scat Players’.

Beckett makes an inconspicuous, assistive device –lighting –a deliberately inhibiting feature, casting the characters in conspicuous indefiniteness: ‘Am I as much as...being seen [*Spot off M. Blackout*].’¹⁸² Katherine Weiss writes that ‘this tormenting light functions as the authoritative gaze of the camera, alienating the actors by erasing the audience, and alienating

¹⁷⁹ Beckett, ‘Play’ in *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 317.

¹⁸⁰ Shaw, p. 69.

¹⁸¹ Katherine Weiss, ‘Perceiving Bodies in Beckett’s *Play*’ in *Samuel Beckett: Endlessness in the Year 2000* ed. by Angela Moorjani et al (The Netherlands: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2001), p. 187

¹⁸² *Play*, p. 317

the audience by merging them with the inquisitive spotlight.’¹⁸³ The symbolic sameness of body and technology is extended further, as Weiss suggests, by directing the gaze of the audience, and even precluding the gaze entirely where Beckett stipulates insufficient light with the ‘urns just discernible’¹⁸⁴ or even no light at all. The audience is a part of this accretion of detail, of this deficiency –they are the ‘mere eye’¹⁸⁵ perhaps. The lighting directs and sometimes even precludes a spectatorial gaze, just as it summons and puts a halt to the characters’ utterances. The inability of the audience to comprehend the dialogue is not simply because Beckett asks that the actors’ voices are ‘faint’ and ‘largely unintelligible,’¹⁸⁶ but because the spotlights that animate the characters are controlled in such a way as to disallow a complete, and therefore intelligible, sentence. The audience’s reception of the play is impaired because, at the moment of disclosure in *Play*, Beckett withdraws from any obligation to reveal –in other words, anything that would permit elucidation, or return these characters and their narrative from formlessness and incompleteness. What the use of technology in *Play* represents is subtraction and diminishment; technology might even function in this piece as a metaphor for Beckett’s asceticism in that it imposes itself at moments of disclosure. The spotlights invoke rapid and incomprehensible slew of sentence fragments from the characters –as if conscious of the brevity and austerity of the play they are in; conscious of the tormentful machinations of the theatre. Just as the verbiage is in conflict with the choreographic and scenic minimalism, and seems almost in danger of exceeding the remit of the play, the urns are of inadequate size to contain the characters’ bodies. Therefore, their bodies do not simply look concealed or contained, rather the probability should arise in the spectator that they have no bodies at all –that each is, to rephrase Kenner, a mere intelligence fastened to a prop:

¹⁸³ Weiss, p. 189.

¹⁸⁴ Beckett, ‘Play’, p. 307.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

In order for the urns to be only one yard high, it is necessary either that traps be used, enabling the actors to stand below stage level, or that they kneel throughout the play, the urns being open at the back.¹⁸⁷

This extreme economy on Beckett's part where actor and prop are merged into one another is best illustrated in Billie Whitelaw's description of performing in a production of *Play*. From this we derive the image of the inhuman, histrionic decay of the characters –an imposed, hyperbolic ageing, whose alienating spectacle belies the relative mundanity of the play's subject matter: a love triangle. However, the sensation of restriction and deficiency is not only the characters' experience on stage, constrained as they are in the urns; rather their physical restriction and exaggerated decline is a visual metaphor for the audience's very experience of this play. Deficiency and ineptitude is not kept onstage, as if conditions only of the theatre; rather Beckett stresses the universality of these conditions by implicating the audience –in other words, making their experience of the play partial and inadequate. As John Calder comments, Beckett 'did not want an art that made life more tolerable, or anything that might deflect the human gaze from the full realisation of its own horror.'¹⁸⁸

Both *Act Without Words I* and *Play* seem to revolve around the themes of subjection and victimisation, with one character trapped in a sadistic behaviouristic experiment, and three tormented or 'tantalised' by clinical, inquisitorial spotlights. Both plays convey restriction, inertia, and impotence. The choreographic and scenic sparseness, the theatrical tendency towards compression, the actors' confinement or speechlessness, and even Beckett's directorial instructions –which involve, as Whitelaw comments, 'tak[ing] all emotion out of it. No colour, no colour'¹⁸⁹ –serve as a pervasive visual metaphor for bodily (and perhaps mental) conditions: cripplement, wasting musculature, anarchic sensations, atrophy,

¹⁸⁷ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 319.

¹⁸⁸ Calder, pp. 80-1.

¹⁸⁹ Quoted in *Conversations With (and About) Samuel Beckett*, p. 85.

dependency, dejectedness, and impotence. However, the paradox here is that whilst these may *represent* natural, degradative processes in the human body, the visual metaphors, being as conspicuous, hyperbolic, and absurd as they are, also connote conditions not innate to but imposed on the body. Beckett's bodies are, as aforementioned, victims of physical decay *and* Beckett's ascetic art, his anti-theatre, if you will. The characters, and specifically their bodies, seem simply the appendix to the theatre, its obliterated, sacrificial victims, and they occasionally address their tormentor: 'Give me up, as a bad job. Go away and start poking and pecking at someone else.'¹⁹⁰ However, as we see in *Catastrophe* (1982), the protagonist, named 'P', is manipulated as if he were a mannequin –quiescent, without protestation, without resistance; he simply '*submits, inert.*'¹⁹¹ The play is, ostensibly, a parable of determinism and dejectedness. The only indication that the protagonist is not a puppet –or prop, even –is in his shaking and in the 'fibrous degeneration'¹⁹² of his hands –neither bodily condition he is in control of. Shaking, as Steven Connor comments, 'will mean fragility' and 'turns on into a quivering marionette,'¹⁹³ which he indubitably is. Shaking or convulsing, makes him a pitiful figure, rehearsing, anticipating even, his eventual decomposition:

The word 'convulsion' comes from *con-vellere*, meaning to tear apart, to pull in all directions. The prefix 'con' works to add the sense of pulling together; convulsion is a way of pulling yourself together, as well as being torn apart. It is the enactment of a dismemberment, the body torn into tiny pieces, that is nevertheless held in one place.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Beckett, 'Play', p. 312.

¹⁹¹ Beckett, 'Catastrophe', p. 458.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Steven Connor, 'The Shakes: Conditions of Tremor' in *The Senses and Society*, vol. 3 Issue 2, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, July 2008), pp. 205-220 (p. 209 & 211).

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 212.

This play conveys the loss of control over, or disownment of, one's own body, and as we see the autocratic director and his obsequious assistant removing P's clothing and manipulating his posture, it is possible that these two characters are the personification of Time. This has autobiographical resonance, as Beckett explains that when writing *Catastrophe* 'in my mind was Dupuytren's contracture (from which I suffer) which reduces the hands to claws.'¹⁹⁵ As in *Play* and Act Two of *Happy Days*, the loss of control over the body is represented by the isolation of the head from the body. As if the mind and the body become completely extraneous to each other, the play ends with the division of the two, this time through lighting rather than physical confinement: '[f]ade-out of light on body. Light on head alone.'¹⁹⁶ If Beckett is representing the ageing body in his dramatic works, the histrionic, unearthly, suggestively artificial manner in which they age would suggest victimisation and subjection – and the possibility should arise that these characters are not ageing but victim to experimentation: 'Is it something I should do with my face, other than utter? Weep [...] Bite off my tongue and swallow it? Spit it out? Would that placate you?'¹⁹⁷ However, his characters' complacency belies this interpretation, and so the theme of imposedness and absurdity in which the subject of ageing ostensibly occurs is made more routine – is even naturalised. By representing ageing as not simply *unheimlich*, but aberrant, instantaneous, and seemingly unjustified, Beckett tacitly offers a way out of ageing. The theme of victimisation gestures constantly to the vague possibility of release or respite, and through this he tantalises *us* with the symbolic possibility of anti-ageing. But as aforementioned, complacency belies the absurdity – and the subtle, unBeckettian optimism – of many of their situations. As such, the possibility arises that these outlandish, absurdist situations are visual metaphors for the aversiveness, constrictiveness, and abjectness of the ageing body; but the mundanity and inevitability of decline as represented through its antithesis – bizarreness, and

¹⁹⁵ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 597

¹⁹⁶ Beckett, 'Catastrophe', p. 461.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

victimisation –offers the possibility of escape or cessation, and as such may be thought of as congenial to anti-ageing discourses. Winnie’s premature burial in *Happy Days* is such an example. Her burial may be read as a metaphor for the constrictiveness or aversiveness of, and alienation from, the ageing body: ‘My arms. [Pause.] My breasts. [Pause.] What arms? [Pause.] What breasts?’¹⁹⁸ Yet Beckett once again offers us some indication or possibility of respite in his instructions for the set design:

What should characterise [the] whole scene, sky and earth,’ he wrote, ‘is a pathetic unsuccessful realism, the kind of tawdriness you get in a 3rd rate musical or pantomime, that quality of *pompier*, laughably earnest bad imitation.’¹⁹⁹

Because Beckett’s rejection of naturalism and his rendering conspicuous the theatrical, artefactual nature of Winnie’s situation and indeed Winnie herself, what deterministic ideas come from the scene are undermined. The sense is that these characters would or might be young were it not for the machinations of the theatre, and as a result of the self-reflexive strangeness and austerity of Beckett’s theatre, an optionality pervades his representation of unruly or impotent bodies and organic decay.

This is certainly implied in Beckett’s minimalist monodrama *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958). The aged character Krapp sits meditatively over a tape recorder, listening to tapes of his younger self and lamenting over ‘a life in which he sacrificed love to artistic ambition.’²⁰⁰ His phonic self-memorialisations render the present-tense Krapp an abject, pitiful, and above all *empty* figure as all the audience/reader knows about the character is from the nostalgic evocation of his past self. Although this reveals very human attributes such as regret, sentimentality, and fear of ageing/death – ‘an old man indulging in morbid reflections on his former glories or

¹⁹⁸ Beckett, ‘Happy Days’ *CDW*, p. 161.

¹⁹⁹ Letter to Alan Schneider, 17th August 1961 quoted by Harmon, M. (ed.) *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett & Alan Schneider* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 94.

²⁰⁰ Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 238.

regretting his past failures,²⁰¹ as James Knowlson comments –the figure on stage is, paradoxically, *inhuman* and Beckett depicts Krapp in such a way as to preclude any real idea of mortality. He is a candidly abject and senescent character, which implies an engagement with mortality, yet he also has a farcical, clownish, and self-referentially performative countenance, which somewhat renounces or undermines that engagement with mortality:

*A wearish old man: KRAPP. Rusty black narrow trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, for capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain. Grimy white shirt open at neck, no collar. Surprising pair of dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed. White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair.*²⁰²

As John Morreall comments, comedy or farce ‘encourages an emotional disengagement,’²⁰³ and combined with this, although he is an emphatically pitiful figure his caricatural physique signals either a repressive or, more optimistically, non-deterministic conception of old age. He is a senescing figure whose deteriorated, ill-fitting clothing provides a visual metaphor for his decay, but this pseudo-epidermis –and by extension his very age –is removable, just as his performance (i.e., as a clown, or clown-like figure, or more self-reflexively as *the character Krapp*) is able to be abandoned or discontinued. In a similar vein, acoustic technologies and hearing ‘promise a certain expansion of corporeal boundaries’ and represent an overcoming or transcendence of ‘spatial and temporal confines.’²⁰⁴ Krapp is described as having a ‘laborious walk’ and his movements are ponderous and fatigable as he ‘fumbles’, ‘stoops’, ‘peers’, ‘feels about’²⁰⁵ or else remains hunched and motionless for the play’s duration.

²⁰¹ James Knowlson & John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1979), p. 83.

²⁰² Beckett, ‘Krapp’s Last Tape’ *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 215.

²⁰³ John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 18.

²⁰⁴ Maude, *Beckett, Technology, and the Body*, p. 7.

²⁰⁵ Beckett, Krapp’s Last Tape, *CDW*, pp. 215-6.

However his vocalic dismemberment, or disembodiment, symbolically alienates him from his senescing body and although he has not become the spectral, post-bodied figure lost to an infinitising (but also destructively obliterating) technological milieu like in *Breath*, he has found, or rather created, an evanescent, acoustic immortalisation for himself, willing himself to ‘be again, be again [...] Once wasn’t enough for you.’²⁰⁶ As Tajiri comments, the ‘tape recorder successfully stages an uncanny resurrection of the young Krapp, even in the presence of the old Krapp.’²⁰⁷ Sound, temporally and spatially, has a transcendent status, and it is a status that physically Krapp is in obvious contrast to, but textually is replaced by – rendering him a jointly young and old figure. The act of listening summons his young self, and given that the audience remains throughout the play bereft of all knowledge of the present-tense Krapp, the younger past-tense Krapp takes precedence. In other words his embodied, senescing self is lost to the evanescent, younger, and potentially ageless, vocalic self, making him an inversely ageing subject. However, Beckett’s own descriptions of the play reveal a more eschatological tone as he describes Krapp as having ‘nothing to talk to but his dying self and nothing to talk to him but his dead one.’²⁰⁸ Even though a voice implies a body (as its origin), it cannot be completely dissociated from the body, and by extension mortality; but the locus of Krapp’s identity, at least for the reader/audience, remains *within* the tape recorder and as such extraneous to his dying body.

Knowlson describes that, for Krapp, ‘so painful is the gulf between past experience that seemed to offer a key to possible fulfilment and a present of failure, emptiness, and meaninglessness.’²⁰⁹ But the present-tense Krapp is not simply empty in the sense he is disillusioned, resentful, and lonely, but in that he seems like a mirage, a two-dimensional figure, whose ostensible falsehood and derisory lack of verisimilitude is compounded firstly

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 223.

²⁰⁷ Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, p. 139.

²⁰⁸ Samuel Beckett, *No Author Better Served*, p. 59

²⁰⁹ Knowlson, *Frescoes of the Skull*, pp. 82-3.

in the domination of the past-tense Krapp (to the neglect/absence of the on-stage Krapp) and secondly in his appearance, which is clownish and self-referentially performative –as if ‘borrowed from the circus-ring.’²¹⁰ With regards to this appearance, Beckett instructed Alan Schneider not to be ‘afraid of exaggerating,’²¹¹ and as such he exposes the mimetic theatre space and the performative, artefactual quality of Krapp, to the exclusion and deliberate failure of what naturalism would have been otherwise achieved. With it, the subjects of ageing and mortality are undermined, evaded, or even transcended. The physical Krapp on stage seems, particularly in his frequent motionlessness, more like a prop than a living, senescing person –and indeed his very name, Krapp, with its excremental connotations also implies a sense of loss, or more crudely, evacuation. But it is a loss not necessarily of identity, youth, or life as seems initially the case; it is a loss of life, not in the sense he is dying or has died, but in the sense that he –or more specifically his aged countenance –is potentially *not real*, and as such the possibility of ageing and death is simply not possible. A visual representation of this is in the tape’s running on in silence as the play ends, and in particular Beckett’s desire to have ‘the luminous eye [the red light of the tape recorder] burning up as the machine runs on in silence and the [theatre] lights go down,’ which conveys a stoical persistence in the face of total annihilation. More particularly Beckett’s direction to have ‘two eyes, one on each side’²¹² of the tape recorder –modelled perhaps on human eyes –implies more a human than purely mechanical persistence. In essence, then, *Krapp’s Last Tape* is not perhaps as eschatological as initially it appears, or even as Beckett intended. In accordance with Beckett’s own directorial suggestions, Krapp is at times a candidly artificial figure, and because of this, ageing and death remain teasingly aleatory states in the Beckettian body. The confined and austere setting of the play –like many of his plays –is, suggestively, a space where ageing simply does not take place.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

²¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *No Author Better Served*, p. 60.

²¹² Ibid., pp. 59-60

ii) **Trilogy Bodies:**

In Beckett's dramatic works, wasting musculature, anarchic sensations, cripplement, inertia, atrophy, and dependency are conditions associated with ageing that are radically dehumanised, and attributed to forces outside of, rather than intrinsic to, the body. As Khaled Besbes comments, Beckett's characters' conditions 'poin[t] to the kind of decay or displacement in time Beckett's characters are often subjected to [...] They are typically presented as melancholy relics who are brought from a distant past just to suffer.'²¹³ His prose works are no different. The trilogy bodies, which I shall analyse in this section, deteriorate through malign, nameless agency –'the old age *they* bestowed upon me [my italics],'²¹⁴ as the narrator of *The Unnamable* laments –rather than through a process of natural, inexorable decline. In this section on ageing in his prose works, I will be arguing that Beckett does explore the fantasy of optionality, centring on ageing characters who attempt to take refuge from the biological reality of senescence by re-imagining their bodies as machines that may potentially be reparable. Beckett's characters are amorphous, nontemporal, nonspatial beings, and as such resist preconceived and identifiable categories such as age or gender. Ulrika Maude comments that 'through the incessant fallings, rollings and crawlings, all of which bring the body ever closer to the earth, Beckettian characters are ceaselessly reminded of their own inescapable materiality'²¹⁵ –and it is of course the materiality of the body that gives it its finitude. It is the purpose of the forthcoming analysis to show that the characters' physical maladies are *not* 'their own', as Maude writes, but are fundamentally unnatural states they are subjected to –that are inflicted upon them *by another*. As such, there is a pervasive non-relation between age and time in the trilogy, and the question arises, then, as to *why* the characters are in the states they find themselves in if not

²¹³ Khaled Besbes, *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre*, p. 191

²¹⁴ *Trilogy*, p. 333.

²¹⁵ Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, p. 99.

through age. Given that ageing in Beckett's *oeuvre* is unnatural not natural, imposed on not intrinsic to the body, it is possible readers should eschew the glum fatalism and essentialist attitudes that ostensibly underpin his work. My analysis of the trilogy starts from the premise that the ways in which Beckett depicts ageing reveals a fervent incredulity toward ageing and mortality, and that as readers we should look less at Beckett as the laureate of *ageing* in 20th century literature and consider more the ways in which his work is prescient: iterating *anti-ageing* discourses and ideologies. Moreover, I shall analyse the ways in which allusions to instruments, mechanisms, and bizarre apparatuses, pervade Beckett's semiology of ageing; how, as a result, gerontological discourses become, if implicitly, bound in technological ones; and the ways in which biological determinism and technological determinism converge.

The loss of self-sovereignty and the profound alienation from the body is not a new or contentious way to depict the ageing process; but the narration of ageing as a departure from all that is natural and timely does belie the theme of mortality and invites ideas of ageing as a temporary imposition and possible cessation. Two of the ways Beckett depicts ageing is with recourse to mechanical or technological imagery, and alongside the themes of subjection, victimisation, possession, and even torture. Underpinning a great deal of age imagery is a very seamless symbiosis of body and machine, and as such his characters seem to exist between abject and transcendent states, anthropomorphised machine and mechanised human. In terms of *why* Beckettian bodies are decrepit and infelicitous, I shall look to some of the technological discourses outlined in the chapter's introduction, and the anti-humanistic themes arising from them. Decrepitude and inertia in Beckett have, after all, no bodily cause or locus, and they are rarely depicted as natural, unconditioned processes. Beckett's characters do not gradually senesce, but are menaced by a malign arbitrary force, rendering their physical conditions unnatural, unearthly, and instantaneous. This carries the implication that his characters are indeed not old but young, or both simultaneously: 'ruined as I am and

still young in this abjection *they* have brought me to [my italics].²¹⁶ Yoshiki Tajiri comments: ‘Often in the trilogy, the body is disorganised. Its parts –the limbs and organs –are isolated from each other rather than forming a coherent whole. Concomitantly, they are often described as extraneous and alien, like mechanical or inanimate objects.’²¹⁷ In *The Unnamable*, the protagonist’s body is an assemblage of inanimate, protean objects juxtaposed in space (not dissimilar to the fantastic prostheses of Dix’s ‘The Scat Players’), all of which throughout the narrative serve as proxies to bodily functions or anatomical features:

Ah yes, I am truly bathed in tears. They gather in my beard and from there, when it can hold no more –no, no beard, no hair either, it is a great smooth ball I carry on my shoulders, featureless, but for the eyes, of which only the sockets remain. And were it not for the distant testimony of my palms, my soles, which I have not yet been able to quash, I would gladly give myself the shape, if not the consistency, of an egg [...] I’m a big talking ball [...] And after all why a ball, rather than something else, and why big? Why not a cylinder, a small cylinder? An egg, a medium egg? No no, that’s the old nonsense, I always knew I was round, solid and round, without daring to say so, no asperities, no apertures, invisible perhaps, or as fast as Sirius in the Great Dog.²¹⁸

This passage seems as much to do with creation as it does entropy; the narrator is at once ‘the indefatigable producer of form’ as well as ‘being degraded by form.’²¹⁹ The narrator is a demiurgical figure, creating and fashioning a body (at times depicted more as a receptacle) at once transcendent and abject, inhuman and carnal. He exists within the interstice between form and formlessness, living and inexistent, ‘fixed’²²⁰ (as he terms) and ablative –or at times tele-present. Like Winnie in *Happy Days*, he talks himself into existence (albeit under duress)

²¹⁶ *Trilogy*, p. 354.

²¹⁷ Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, p. 45.

²¹⁸ *Trilogy*, p. 307.

²¹⁹ Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘Murphydurke, or towards a Phenomenology of Immaturity’ in *Beckett and Phenomenology*, ed. by Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman (London & New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 123.

²²⁰ *Trilogy*, p. 297.

in a similar ‘cris[i]s of loquaciousness’²²¹ –or as the narrator himself describes: ‘words pronouncing me alive’²²² –whilst at the same time begging for quittance: for silence/death. He is an inadequate creation, and this is signalled in his inability to function as a whole: ‘I don’t yet know how to move, either locally, in relation to myself, or bodily, in relation to the rest of the shit.’²²³ This is also experienced by Watt, as he describes his body parts fatiguing at different rates: ‘my weary little legs must be carrying me as best they may away, my trunk that is wearier still and my head that is weariest of all.’²²⁴ Like Watt, the unnamable is not a totality, nonspatial, dimensionless presence, his body a series of occlusions, illogical extensions, and self-sufficient parts –at times less like a human and more an anthropomorphised machine endowed with the power of speech. In Volume I of *Capital* (1867-1894), Karl Marx describes machinery as ‘constitut[ing] a sort of industrial perpetual motion, which would go on reproducing without pause.’²²⁵ In *The Unnamable* we have its linguistic/phonic equivalent as the narrator is coerced into incessant and suggestively automatized speech, lamenting: ‘Ah, if only this voice could stop.’²²⁶ ‘Perpetual motion’ is a phrase used both by Marx when describing machinery and by Beckett when describing the narrator in *The Unnamable*.²²⁷ In *The Unnamable* not only do we have a mechanised, anthropomorphic being, but a machine/narrator whose ‘perpetual motion’ –in this case his loquacity –is ostensibly mediated and supervised (albeit inattentively), and whose output is an un-paragraphed monologue produced at the expense of literary conventions such as plot, structure, character development, and literary subjectivism. He conveys a sense of distance from what body he has, commenting: ‘[i]f I accomplish other natural functions it is

²²¹ James Knowlson (ed.), ‘Happy Days’ in *The Production Notebook of Samuel Beckett* (London: Grove Press, 1986), p. 177.

²²² *Trilogy*, p. 338.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

²²⁴ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 47.

²²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, p. 428.

²²⁶ *Trilogy*, p. 374.

²²⁷ *Trilogy*, p. 294.

unawares,' before moving on to saying 'I resume, having no alternative'²²⁸ –as if both dispossessed of a body and nothing but 'instrument of civilised and refined exploitation.'²²⁹

What makes these descriptions pertain less to human enslavement and more to technological instrumentality are the descriptions of the narrator's body and motility. He describes his movements and the relation of others to himself as having the precision and constancy of a machine, although likened more to the laws of celestial mechanics (which, whilst self-elevating still implies subjection to forces beyond his control):

I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain. In a sense I would be better off at the circumference, since my eyes are always fixed in the same direction. But I am certainly not at the circumference. For if I were it would follow that Molloy, wheeling about me as he does, would issue from the enceinte at every revolution, which is manifestly impossible. But he does in fact wheel, does he not perhaps simply pass before me in a straight line? No, he wheels, I feel it, and about me, like a planet about its sun [...] It is equally possible, I do not deny it, that I too am in perpetual motion, accompanied by Malone, as the earth by its moon.²³⁰

Likening the narrator to a machine is not to say he is emancipated from all corporal limitations, but that, as an instrument or device, he is subjugated by those that, so to speak, use him. His unwitting incessantness likens him to what in *A Critique of Dialectical Reason* Jean-Paul Sartre terms 'being-outside-oneself' which 'is defined as *bewitched matter* (that is, precisely as an inorganic, worked materiality which develops a non-human activity because its passivity synthesises the serial infinity of human acts which sustain it.'²³¹ As an instrument, the unnamable to some extent personifies 'the *negation* of man by man.' He is

²²⁸ *Trilogy*, pp. 295 & 296.

²²⁹ *Capital*, p. 386.

²³⁰ *Trilogy*, p. 297.

²³¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *A Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. by Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. by Jonathan Rée (London: NLB, 1976), pp. 219.

acquiescent to another's command, and becomes a '*mere inert thin[g]*' without life, without sentience, and without agency of his own –in other words 'sub-human', his life justified '*on the basis of a technical progress*,²³² in this case his loquacity. Although Beckett is quite evidently not making such a political/humanistic/Marxist critique, the unnamable's implied servitude, his sub-human countenance, and his dispossession of all sense of choice ('I long to cease [...] I can't cease'²³³), is analogous to such images and such discourses. His incessantness surpasses both his will and his (human) capability,²³⁴ and most of all, his vocalic alienation, described as a voice that 'issues from me' *ad infinitum* but 'is not mine,'²³⁵ both imply a clandestine tormentor or, more mundanely, user/worker. His loquacity signifies mechanical output, which itself implies a user, yet this output also brings him into existence, and so whilst the mechanism or technological apparatus should be in antithesis to the body it is its replacement or surrogate and symbolically births and sustains the unnamable. As Sartre writes in *a Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 'machines, by their structure and functions, determine the nature of their servants as the rigid and imperious future of undetermined individuals and, thereby, *create men*.'²³⁶ His identity is fissured in much the same way as Krapp's identity is between his physical and phonic self –the latter not emanating but extraneous to his body. If in *Krapp's Last Tape*, the tape recorder is the locus or custodian of his identity –functioning as it does as his prosthetic memory –then in *The Unnamable*, the vestigial character *is* the tape recorder. Like an instrument or mechanical device, he cannot stop if commanded to 'transmit the words,'²³⁷ and he is, if not a machine itself, then the 'mere appendix to the machine or at worst the machine's obliterated victim.'²³⁸ The state of being

²³² Ibid., pp. 156-9.

²³³ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 393.

²³⁴ A relentlessness that is represented in the very nature of prose itself, as described by Beckett in his preference over 'the limits of theatre as compared to the non-limitations of prose.'

²³⁵ *Trilogy*, p. 309.

²³⁶ Sartre, p. 159.

²³⁷ *Trilogy*, p. 352.

²³⁸ James E. Katz et al., *Mediating the Human Body*, p. 2.

subordinated to another's control *as a mechanism* or piece of apparatus has metaphorical value in terms of foregrounding a deterministic portrayal of ageing (e.g., the mechanism as the body, whose unruly nature forces the individual to acquiesce to moments of immobility or inertia). However, the nature of the metaphor precludes any real engagement with ageing insofar as the mechanism or machine, unlike a body, is inorganic, and above all, restorable, replaceable, and replicable. Sartre writes 'objectification is alienation,' and in *The Unnamable* where Beckett appears to confront aspects of ageing –or at least alienation from one's body –in a technological milieu, and represent this senescing character as an enslaved, exploited, or as he describes 'inhabited',²³⁹ object/tool, a simple analogy is made between the pathological and the technological. As an object of utility –at once human and mechanism, susceptible and impervious to age –he is reminiscent of Marx's description: 'the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.'²⁴⁰

As J.E. Dearlove describes, '[h]e is made of words, but words belong to others,' and he is dependent 'upon the act of speaking but not upon the words spoken,'²⁴¹ as if he is not the origin of the message but its mediation. He is the very apparatus that interposes itself between the voice and its origin, disassociating the two and in the process making the individual omnipresent and himself more dimensionless and nonspatial than before –this is conveyed by the narrator as he remarks: 'I don't know where I end.'²⁴² However, he is not only the apparatus that mediates a message such as a telephone or tape recorder, but at once the speaker and recipient of his message, and this is hinted at in this schizoid dialogue below,

²³⁹ *Trilogy*, p. 406.

²⁴⁰ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Lawrence H. Simon (USA: Hackett Publishing Inc., 1994), p. 233.

²⁴¹ J.E. Dearlove, *Accommodating the Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Nonrelational Art* (USA: Duke University Press, 1982), p. 63 & 64.

²⁴² Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 348.

which conflates human loquacity and mechanical incessantness, human desire or intent and robot teleology:

I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any,
until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on,
perhaps it's done already [...] I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you
must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.²⁴³

This voice is, as Tajiri describes, prosthetic. He defines the prosthetic voice as 'the voice that is mediated by machines or technology –the voice coming from the tape recorder, telephone or radio.'²⁴⁴ Krapp's phonic self-resurrection and his status as the origin and recipient of his messages is paradigmatic of the narrator's alienating, automatised orality in *The Unnamable* –what he describes initially as 'my voice' and then, dropping the possessive pronoun, '*the* voice [my italics].'²⁴⁵ Both Krapp and the unnamable have technologised, vicarious existences, and this technologisation is consubstantial with their physical maladies, which necessitate a similar alienation, or distance, from their bodies (and consequently a similarly fissured identity). Beckett also represents a similar loss of self-sovereignty in *Play*, where the characters' voices are provoked by stage lighting, as well as in *Not I* where the speaker is likened explicitly to a disconnected machine: '...incapable of deceit...or the machine...more likely the machine...so disconnected...never got the message...or powerless to respond'²⁴⁶). This is also the case in *Breath* where the body is entirely supplanted by technology and where the self (in this case represented through the sound of breathing) is made present by way of detour through speakers, and deposited on stage through various proxies. Technology is 'a metaphor that indicates alterity,' but perhaps also ageing and more particularly death

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 418.

²⁴⁴ Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, p. 138.

²⁴⁵ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 397

²⁴⁶ Beckett, 'Not I' in *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 378.

inasmuch as (like with *Krapp's Last Tape*) it 'separate[s] the voice from the body and make[s] it resemble a ghostly voice.'²⁴⁷

In *The Unnamable* Beckett often seems to equate this amorphous, tele-present, technologised being with the simpler, more identifiable image of a pitiful senescing man alienated from and incapable of using his fatigable, atrophying body. At times it is as if Beckett is rendering the character's abjection at once bodily and technological in origin, which creates an image of ageing and decrepitude saturated (albeit only in part) with promises of remittance or cure. He acknowledges his corporal form, writing unremarkably of his body: 'here I can count on my body alone, my body incapable of the smallest movement and whose very eyes can no longer close as they once could.'²⁴⁸ He also conveys a sense of connectedness, totality, and self-possession, which is not always evident: 'I know I am seated, my hands on my knees, because of the pressure against my rump, against the soles of my feet, against the palms of my hands, against my knees.'²⁴⁹ However, he withdraws from this human side, depicting a sense of self-distance and disownment: 'the inside of my distant skull where once I wandered, now am fixed, lost for tininess, or straining against the walls with my head, my hands, my feet, my back'²⁵⁰ –which belies the theme of ageing as he becomes more abstract and his physical maladies less identifiable. His skull is a receptacle, or void, and his extremities and defining features a series of prostheses or unnecessary (technological?) annexations. However, although fundamentally abstract they remain a part of his disintegrative, abject carapace that he is at once entombed in and falls from him like a costume: 'all those things have fallen, all the things that stick out, with my eyes, my hair, without leaving a trace [...] I'm a big talking ball.'²⁵¹ He seems at once in the throes of

²⁴⁷ Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, p. 167.

²⁴⁸ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 303.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 304-5.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

decomposition and a sleek, appendageless, semi-infinite, and non-corporal being, thrown free of the mortal coil, ‘soaring above [his] own condition.’²⁵² He is reminiscent of the hybridity underpinning Marx’s discussions of the industrialisation of manual labour: ‘[i]t transforms the worker into a cripple, a monster [...] [T]he individual himself is split up, is transformed into the automatic motor of some partial operation’ and, most befitting the Beckettian body, becomes ‘nothing more than a fragment of his own body.’²⁵³ The unnamable certainly becomes a mere fragment of his body, as indicated in the following passage:

I don’t feel it, I don’t feel a mouth on me, nor a head, do I feel an ear, frankly now, do I feel an ear, well frankly now I don’t, so much the worse, I don’t feel an ear either [...] I must feel something, yes, I feel something, they say I feel something, I don’t know what it is, I don’t know what I feel, tell me what I feel and I’ll tell you who I am, they’ll tell me who I am, I won’t understand but the thing will be said, they’ll have said who I am, and I’ll have heard, without an ear I’ll have heard, and I’ll have said it, without a mouth I’ll have said it, I’ll have said it inside me, then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that’s what I feel, an outside and an inside and mine the middle, perhaps that’s what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I’m neither outside nor the other. I’m in the middle, I’m the partition, I’ve two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that’s what I feel, myself vibrating, I’m the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don’t belong to either.²⁵⁴

He has reduced himself to a ‘fragment of his own body’ or mere function, the tympanum – which, uniting the physiological and the technological, is either the middle ear or the diaphragm of a telephone – or more abstractly, a space or void (a recessed space bounded by

²⁵² Ibid., p. 353.

²⁵³ Marx, *Capital*, p. 381.

²⁵⁴ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 386.

an arch). Not only is his voice dissociated from his body, ‘dislodged from himself and coming from outside,’²⁵⁵ but as aforementioned, he seems to identify his very body (or what exists of his body) as not the origin or locus of his identity, but as some form of mediation – as if indeed he were nothing but an instrument condemned to ‘the field of practical passivity.’²⁵⁶ He ‘h[as] no mouth,’ is ‘short of a leg,’ is ‘possessed of nothing but my voice,’ is ‘bereft of hands,’²⁵⁷ and is condemned to a decaying but simultaneously inexistent body ‘without feeling an ear on me, or a head, or a body, or a soul [...] [I]f only I could feel something on me it would be a starting-point.’²⁵⁸ He not only exists in the interstice between form and formlessness, but between a transcendent and senescent body, and at once present and tele-present. The narrator finds some unusual, nihilistic ontological allegiance to whatever instrument or apparatus he is, or envisions himself as, and similar to *Breath*, the implication is that he has been technologised to the point of absence –or towards becoming simply a ‘practico-inert exteriority.’²⁵⁹ Yet this is also bound up with the theme of ageing and the nihilating effects of time on the body, which is how the unnamable rationalises his condition: ‘I must be extremely old.’²⁶⁰ His body does represent time unfolding, or unfolded, and his body is ‘worn out at last, or feeble with old age’²⁶¹ and he is decomposing (albeit in an abstract and hyperbolic manner). However, at the same time organic decay, the breaking down of physical matter, is also a metaphor for the various bodily absences that technological substitution entails –and again, this is represented in a hyperbolic manner, commenting ‘Ah if I were flesh and blood.’²⁶² One might argue, then, there is little differentiation between the technological and the pathological.

²⁵⁵ Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, p. 142.

²⁵⁶ Sartre, *A Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p. 219.

²⁵⁷ Beckett, *Trilogy*, pp. 387, 317, 313.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 391 & 409.

²⁵⁹ Sartre, *A Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p. 219.

²⁶⁰ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 416

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 356

The descriptions convey both abjectness and survivability, and his identity is at once compressed and atomised –and at points even spectral –as if at once condemned to and also emancipated from his body. This is evident in the different ways he describes his movement: ‘on my hands and knees in the later stages, then crawling on my belly or rolling on the ground’ and as ‘a succession of irregular loops, now sharp and short as in the waltz, now of a parabolic sweep that embraces entire boglands, now between the two, somewhere or other, and invariably unpredictable in direction.’²⁶³ Not only spectral and grittily corporal, he is of course mechanical –an acoustic or communicative apparatus such as a tape recorder, telephone, or gramophone, even –and moves and speaks/transmits under duress:

The only problem for me was how to continue since I could not do otherwise, to the best of my declining powers, in the motion which had been imparted to me. This obligation, and the quasi-impossibility of fulfilling it, engrossed me in a purely mechanical way, excluding notably the free play of the intelligence and sensibility, so that my situation rather resembled that of an old broken down cart- or bat-horse unable to receive the least information either from its instinct or from its observation as to whether it is moving towards the stable or away from it, and not greatly caring either way.²⁶⁴

He conveys an evacuation of all natural, intrinsic reactions and, combined with his ‘monstrous carapace,’²⁶⁵ the geometric shapes that comprise his body, and his ostensibly mechanical ‘perpetual motion’²⁶⁶ that he has no control over, he is rendered comparable to Marx’s depiction of the machine that supplants the human worker:

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 322.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 327.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 297

[The] mechanical monster whose body fills the whole factory, and whose demon power, hidden from our sight at first because of the measured and almost ceremonious character of the movement of his giant limbs, discloses itself at length in the vast and furious whirl of his numberless working organs.²⁶⁷

The presence of technology in *The Unnamable* is an implied one. The image of the tape recorder or instrumental mediation of some sort is a particularly pervasive one when the unnamable talks of himself. His voice, and indeed his sense of self-presence, is ‘telephonic’ as his voice is dislodged from its point of origin: ‘What a joy to know where one is, and where one will stay, without being there.’²⁶⁸ Tajiri writes that ‘devices such as the tape recorder and telephone remove a voice from its origin and create distance or exteriority in the voice’²⁶⁹—or as McLuhan writes, invests an individual ‘with all kinds of nonvisual character.’²⁷⁰ Again, this is made evident as the narrator laments ‘I don’t know where I end.’²⁷¹ That the narrator has no self-command and that his voice is, like his limbs, dissociated from his body, is not technological *or* pathological in origin: it is both. The narrator often describes defamiliarising postures, movements, or sensations that are consubstantial with his ‘mortal inertia.’²⁷² As Ulrika Maude notes, ‘[t]he bodies in Beckett, as a result of their abject and unruly nature, threaten the subject’s autonomy,’²⁷³ and as such his sense of self-differentiation is a result of this abjectness—his ‘idiotic pains’ and ‘state of decay.’²⁷⁴ However, his identity is fissured not only because of the defamiliarising sensations that retard and bring to conscious attention one’s formerly tacit command of the body, but because of technological mediation and tele-presence. Although subtle, Beckett equates the

²⁶⁷ Marx, *Capital*, p. 403.

²⁶⁸ *Trilogy*, p. 341.

²⁶⁹ Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, p. 142.

²⁷⁰ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 291.

²⁷¹ *Trilogy*, p. 348.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 335.

²⁷³ Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, p. 8.

²⁷⁴ *Trilogy*, p. 311 & 319.

disintegrating body with evanescent speech, and as such presents technology –in particular how it isolates, externalises, and renders unfamiliar body parts/functions –a metaphor for pathology. The technological mediation of his voice is paralleled by his organic decay, as both entail absence and departure from the self. The strangeness, aversiveness, and constrictiveness of his body is equivalent to his ‘vocalic uncanny’,²⁷⁵ which is interesting inasmuch as the former represents natural, organic decay, ‘bowed down with years and impositions’,²⁷⁶ and the latter a technological imposition –or what the narrator describes as the ‘old age they bestowed upon me.’²⁷⁷ What is represented then is a techno-pathological affliction. Ostensibly, the narrator’s self-distance is pathological and telephonic, and this is represented through his lack of bodily and vocalic provenance. He occupies an abject, fatigable, vegetative, and ageing body that is unadulterated by technology, afflicted with ‘multiple softenings, manifold hardenings, insensitive to blows, sight failing, chronic gripes, [...] heart failing, heart irregular, sweet-tempered, smell failing, heavy sleeper, no erections [...] inoperable [and] untransportable.’²⁷⁸ However, just as he is, at times, unconnected to his body, whether through injury or atrophy, so too is his mechanically mediated, disembodied voice. He has a vicarious nonspatial existence; his body and his voice resist any associationist conception which, as Merleau-Ponty describes, conceives of the body ‘parts [as] inter-related [...] not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other’ over which the individual is ‘in undivided possession.’²⁷⁹ His vocalisations are made by him yet he hears them as if emanating from another, rendering him tele-present –at once the speaker and recipient of his message:

²⁷⁵ Steven Connor, quoted by Tajiri in *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, p. 139.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

²⁷⁷ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 333.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 380-1.

²⁷⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility’, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 112.

This voice that speaks, knowing that it lies, indifferent to what it says, too old perhaps and too abased ever to succeed in saying the words that would be its last, knowing itself useless and its uselessness in vain [...] I'll ask not more questions, there are no more questions, I know none any more. It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can't stop it, I can't prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me. It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know, it's round that I must revolve, of that I must speak, with this voice that is not mine, but can only be mine, since there is no one but me, or if there are others, to whom it might belong, they have never come near me.²⁸⁰

Elsewhere in the trilogy is a comparable sense of abjection and subjugation. Like in *The Unnamable*, in *Molloy* Beckett seems at times to juxtapose organic decay and technological vitalism. He describes the body, albeit only very suggestively, with recourse to technological/mechanical imagery, and as Molloy and Malone senesce, their physical conditions seem less a natural, inevitable consequence of time and more 'the appendix to [a] machine'²⁸¹ they have long since failed to control. He describes how 'when I was walking, or even propped up against something, that I suddenly collapsed, like a puppet when its strings are dropped, and lay long where I fell, literally boneless.'²⁸² Like the unnamable, he has an ill-defined sense of physical and bodily provenance, describing how 'the limits of my region were unknown to me. But I felt they were far away [...] the confines of my room, of my bed, of my body, are as remote from me as were those of my region.'²⁸³ His control over his body seems endogenous, coming from Molloy himself, inhumed within his deviant body: 'I fell

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 309.

²⁸¹ James E. Katz et al., *Mediating the Human Body*, p. 2.

²⁸² Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 51.

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 61. [Picador edition from this point onwards unless otherwise stated],

asleep, I woke up in a bed, in my skin.’²⁸⁴ However, control over his body is also *exogenous*, coming from another, possibly malignant source or person, and rendering him, so to speak, teletopical (i.e., the space his body occupies, or alternatively his sense of emplacement, at once local and remote). Molloy depicts movement and posture not in terms of a tacit self-command, but as a conscious, mediated task, as if the body was simply an obstruction, impediment, or technological annexation, and his limbs constitutive of independent, intractable creatures gestating in, birthed by, and now emancipated from him. To continue the metaphor of before, he almost seems at once ventriloquist and puppet. In the following quotation, his conflicted identity is gained through his depiction of his hands’ self-sufficiency combined with his paradoxical retention of the possessive pronoun ‘my’:

And when I see my hands, on the sheet, which they love to floccillate already, they are not mine, less than ever mind, I have no arms, they are a couple, they play with the sheet, love-play perhaps, trying to get up perhaps, one on top of the other. But it doesn’t last, I bring them back, little by little, towards me, it’s resting time.²⁸⁵

This is similar to Beckett’s descriptions of limbs in *Watt* (1953) also: ‘the knees, on these occasions, did not bend. They could have, but they did not. No knees could better bend than Watt’s when they chose.’²⁸⁶ Although, physically, there is nothing to suggest Molloy’s limbs are not limbs but prostheses, they each seem to have the quality of both a fleshy limb and a maladroit, osteo-mechanical adjunct because of the way they are controlled. His movement and postures are not arrived at through unconscious self-command, but as if inexpertly manipulating an animal, child, or automaton. The idea of his limbs as childlike is not

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁸⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Jupiter Books, 1963), p. 29.

unremarkable given Molloy's declaration that 'I have taken her [his mother's] place. I must resemble her more and more. All I need now is a son. Perhaps I have one somewhere.'²⁸⁷

However, his offspring are not, so to speak, separate beings, but his limbs; he has, at least in part, given birth to himself –or, to be more specific, to his limbs. Molloy is in this sense, then, a tenseless, nontemporal being, straddling infancy/childhood and senescence –a senile infant, if you will, or 'an old foetus'²⁸⁸ as Malone describes, 'merging two times in one,'²⁸⁹ or as the narrator of *Texts for Nothing* (1950-1952) comments: '[a]ll mingles, times and tenses.'²⁹⁰

However, his limbs not only appear as children but automata, and this is implied in his physical movement, which often seems a highly conscious and mediated task: '[m]y feet, you see, never took me to my mother unless they received a definite order to do so,' and 'I would stick out my nose, then hastily call it in again.'²⁹¹ Elsewhere in the Beckett canon there are similar passages. For example in *Texts for Nothing* the narrator, either in paralytic frustration or attempting to animate a broken machine, tries to provoke some movement: 'I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack foundered in the street, struggling no more, struggling again, till it gives up. I say to the head, Leave it alone, stay quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever.'²⁹² Likewise, in *Watt* the narrator's efforts at locomotion render his identity ambiguous, at once inhumed within a senescing body and manipulating an unresponsive machine. His body is indeed the locus where internal and external, machine and human converge:

Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 207.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

²⁹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* (London: Calder & Boyars Ltd., 1974), p. 10.

²⁹¹ Beckett, *Trilogy*, pp. 29 & 49.

²⁹² Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, p. 7.

towards the north and to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south [...] and so on, over and over again, many many times, until he reached his destination.²⁹³

Steven Connor describes this as an ‘ongoing, chaotic compromise between the dimensions of up and down, left and right.’²⁹⁴

The narrative does not portray the traversal of space but an embarrassing plethora of potential, hypothetical, space, rendered so by the character’s tragicomic, maladroit, and inexpert command of his body. His descriptions of walking are comparable to those of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who describes the act as:

...a perpetual falling with a perpetual self-recovery. It is a most complex, violent, and perilous operation, which we divest of its extreme danger only by continual practice from a very early period in life. We find how complex it is when we attempt to analyze it [...] We learn how violent it is, when we walk against a post or a door in the dark. We discover how dangerous it is, when we slip or trip and come down, perhaps breaking or dislocating our limbs, or overlook the last flight of stairs, and discover with what headlong violence we have been hurling ourselves forward.²⁹⁵

Walking is depicted by Beckett with a similar sense of violence. His characters’ movements seem hyperbolic and cerebral, part of a benign yet futile exodus untaken with bodily movements whose sheer number counterpose the amount of space traversed (i.e. very little, or quite possibly none). These moments of Beckettian imbalance and collapse are parodied – paid homage to – by the conceptual artist Bruce Nauman and his 1968 video ‘Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)’:

²⁹³ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 28.

²⁹⁴ Steven Connor, ‘Shifting Ground’ <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/beckettnauman/> [accessed 10/10]

²⁹⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Physiology of Walking," from *Pages From an Old Volume of Life: A Collection of Essays, 1857-1881*, 7th edn. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1887), pp. 127-8.

Hands clasped behind his back, he kicks one leg up at a right angle to his body, pivots forty-five degrees, falls forward hard with a thumping noise, extends the rear leg again at a right angle behind [...] The unbalancing of the walk is doubled by the fact that Nauman taped the movements with the camera on its side, so that he appears to be walking up a wall, gravityless.²⁹⁶

Beckett even appears to connect the acts of wondering and wandering, and by extension those of reading and walking. In *Molloy* for instance, on occasion his descriptions of legs are tautological and cumbersome, allowing for no real sense of progression in the narrative that correlates with Molloy's own thwarted locomotion:

For I no longer had one bad leg plus another more or less good, but now both were equally bad. And the worse, to my mind, was that which till now had been good, at least comparatively good, and whose change for the worse I had not yet got used to. So in a way, if you like, I still had one bad leg and one good, or rather less bad, with this difference however, that the less bad now was the less good of heretofore.²⁹⁷

Like in *The Unnamable*, in *Molloy* technology has an implied presence. Although it belies the subject of organic decay, Beckett's descriptions of the ageing body return obsessively and repetitively to the image of the mechanism and attendant notions of mediation and post-bodiedness. In the figure of Molloy, Beckett presents us with both a senescing character and a technologised character. Images of decline and decrepitude all invoke images of technological instrumentality. His limbs form a part of 'the inventory of my possessions,'²⁹⁸ which includes objects such as his bicycle and his crutches. His leg has an uncanny

²⁹⁶ Steven Connor et al., 'Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)'

http://www.themodernword.com/beckett/beckett_film_nauman.html [accessed 10/10/11]

²⁹⁷ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 77.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

congeniality with the crutch –he remarks at one point, ‘my leg as stiff as my crutches’²⁹⁹ –and the ambiguous boundaries between his ‘fatal skin’³⁰⁰ and the prostheses around him is compounded in his characteristic omission of the possessive pronoun ‘my’: ‘[t]he stiff leg hurt me, admittedly, I mean the old stiff leg, and it was the other which I normally used as a pivot, or prop.’³⁰¹ Both Molloy’s body and his bicycle, which is chainless, are deficient, and in his essay ‘The Cartesian Centaur’ Kenner observes that:

[i]n this tableau man and machine mingle in conjoint stasis, each indispensable to the other’s support. At rest it extends and stabilizes Molloy’s endoskeleton. In motion, to it complements and amends his structural deficiencies.³⁰²

He is, as Tajiri comments, ‘doomed to an ever deteriorating machine –that is, the human body.’³⁰³ His limbs are secondary, lateralised, or debased additions to his body, and are often described as deficient or defective instruments:

Now my sick leg, I forget which, it’s immaterial here, was in a condition neither to dig, because it was rigid, nor alone to support me, because it would have collapsed. I had so to speak only one leg at my disposal, I was virtually one-legged, and I would have been happier, livelier, amputated at the groin. And if they had removed a few testicles into the bargain I wouldn’t have objected.³⁰⁴

Tajiri goes so far as to argue that ‘his crutches and foot [are] becoming parts of the machine, just like the cross-bar, axle and pedals,’³⁰⁵ and it is this seamless conflation of physical decomposition and technology or technologisation that is becoming increasingly prominent a

²⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 49 .

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 70.

³⁰² Kenner, ‘The Cartesian Centaur’ in *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, p. 118.

³⁰³ Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body*, p. 43.

³⁰⁴ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 34.

³⁰⁵ Tajiri, p. 43.

theme in contemporary technophilic culture. At times decrepitude in *Molloy* and *The Unnamable* seem consubstantial with mechanisation or technologisation; that organic decay is as a result of, as opposed to being palliated or placated by, technology. Beckett's characters are not humans extended by prostheses or mechanisms, but are decrepit, senescing, anthropomorphised machines, whose body parts –namely the limbs –do not form a totality but are a series of occlusions, each one self-sufficient and even sentient, or alternatively controlled by a malignant agency. The expression of physical malady as malign sentience is captured succinctly in Beckett's phrase from *Molloy*: 'the *defection* of my good leg [my italics]'³⁰⁶ –the noun 'defection' meaning both failure, lack, or loss, *and* the desertion from allegiance, duty, or loyalty.

Beckett's senescing, at times unconvincingly human characters are at once controlling the machine and *are* the machine. Beckett's representation firstly of this sense of subjugation and secondly of an ageing process that is unnatural, unearthly, and imposed, makes aspects of the trilogy comparable to aspects of the philosophical study of technology in contemporary culture. In *Open Sky* Paul Virilio critiques the growing dependency on technology:

Where the motorization of transport and information once caused a *general mobilization* of populations, swept up into the exodus of work and then of leisure, instantaneous transmission tools cause the reverse: *a growing inertia*; television and especially remote control action no longer requiring people to be mobile, but merely to be mobile on the spot.³⁰⁷

This calls to mind the narrator in *The Unnamable* who envisions everything as revolving around him in planetary motion, as well as Winnie in *Happy Days* and the inert narrator in *Malone Dies*:

³⁰⁶ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 78.

³⁰⁷ Virilio, *Open Sky*, p. 20.

I would identify them by touch, the message would flow all along the stick, I would hook the desired object and bring it over to the bed, I would hear it coming towards me over the floor, gliding, jogging, less and less dear, I would hoist it up on the bed in such a way as not to break the window or damage the ceiling, and at last I would have it in my hands.³⁰⁸

Similar to Virilio's anti-humanist conception of technological advance, in Beckett's prose and dramaturgy, technology is untranscendent. It is not a palliative or infinitizing force but is incorporated into the body as deficient limb, a necrotic organ, or an unwanted illness or impediment. Technology is an obstruction in the same way the abject body is; in some cases it even becomes a metaphor for the failing body, or a victimising presence *as a result of which* Beckett's bodies senesce. The technological and the pathological are in essence equivalent, and this is what Virilio moves on to depict:

This *citizen-terminal* soon to be decked out to the eyeballs with interactive prostheses based on the pathological model of the 'spastic', wired to control his/her domestic environment without having physically to stir: the catastrophic figure of an individual who has lost the capacity for immediate intervention along with natural motricity and who abandons himself, for want of anything better, to the capabilities of captors, sensors and other remote control scanners that turn him into a being controlled by the machine with which, they say, he talks. Service or servitude, that is the question.³⁰⁹

This is particularly relevant with regards to *The Unnamable*, where the character is static, bodiless, subjugated, victimised, and a cross between paralytic frustration, where he cannot control his body, and technological instrumentality, where what self-command he does have must oblige the whims of a remote user. Moreover, as the origin and mediation of his voice,

³⁰⁸ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 229.

³⁰⁹ Virilio, p. 20.

he is ‘telepresent, here and elsewhere, *at the same time* [...] both transmitter and receiver.’³¹⁰ Likewise, Molloy’s body is victim to progressive subtractions as if his entire body were a selection of prostheses either juxtaposed in space or simply missing: ‘My boots. They came up to where my calves would have been if I had had calves.’³¹¹ Virilio moves on to argue that technology ‘attacks the body of the able-bodied person, equipped to the eyeballs with interactive prostheses, who is now modelled on the disabled person equipped to control his environment without physically shifting.’³¹² It is possible to resituate analysis of *Happy Days* within this type of discourse, not simply because it is an enduring image of physical limitation and inertia, but because Winnie exercises complete control over her environment, which she does so contentedly through use of a capacious black bag. Molloy often addresses the matter of his physical decay and his ageing, yet negates all sense of that being a purely physiological phenomenon in his confessing ‘I [...] was not natural enough to enter into that order of things.’³¹³ And as Tajiri notes, Beckett continually denaturalises both the characters’ predicaments and their physical conditions: it is also well known that Beckett relentlessly demanded that his actors and actresses control their body accurately like a machine and moves to describe the trilogy ‘which exemplifies the constrained and constraining prosthetic body.’³¹⁴ It is as if Beckett is wishing to confront the subject of ageing and decay in general, but doing so in such a way as to remove all human referents – a task he succeeded with in *Breath*.

Virilio demonstrates how technology interposes itself between the individual and his or her body, and how in over-reliance on technology out of expediency or fashion rather than necessity or palliation, individuals are ‘doomed to inertia [...] deliberately limiting [their]

³¹⁰ Virilio, pp. 10 & 11.

³¹¹ *Trilogy*, p. 44.

³¹² Virilio, p. 33.

³¹³ *Trilogy*, p. 42.

³¹⁴ Tajiri, p. 42.

body's area of influence to a few gestures, a few impulses.³¹⁵ He shows how it is possible to approach disability *as* a technological, and fundamentally self-crafted, phenomenon –the implication being that, if knowingly done, technology invokes thanatotic reactions, symbolically hastening the course to age and death as one calculatingly displaces, renders redundant and obsolete, the human body. If we were to link this instead with ageing rather than disability, then ageing would take on an artificial quality and the image of senescing bodies would not have the same temporal connotations (i.e. would cease to be a marker, or signifier, of time passed). As I have stressed, ageing in the trilogy *is* unnatural, and the characters are seemingly without bodies when suffering from the sort of conditions that inescapably remind them of their status as *embodied* subjects. Malone remarks that ‘it is at the mercy of these sensations, *which happily I know to be illusory*, that I have to live and work [my italics]’³¹⁶ –as if his physical maladies are impermanent and in some way not endemic to his body, or at least his body in the present. As with Molloy, age is something exogenous, it is not something Malone experiences as if intrinsic to *his* body and this is evident when he describes his body, yet again as if it were another: ‘[t]wo old hands, veined, ringed, seek each other, clasp’ and ‘when I moved I saw nothing but the ground and the play of my feet, the good one springing forward, holding back, setting itself down, waiting for the other to come up.’³¹⁷ At the times he confronts his physical pain, he curtly rejects his very humanness or implies his ageing countenance is in some way artificial or performative, with the promise or possibility of remittance: ‘For waking again towards dawn, this time in consequence of a *natural need*, and with a mild erection, *to make things more lifelike* [my italics].’³¹⁸ He describes the ageing process in highly metaphorical terms, with recourse not to the flesh but to other natural imagery, and as such situating the very concept of his ageing not

³¹⁵ Virilio, pp. 16-7.

³¹⁶ Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 102.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110 & 146.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

within body but outside of it in the environment (which is the implication Virilio's *Open Sky* invites):

...what I saw was more like a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected me from all I was condemned to be [...] But what words can describe this sensation at first all darkness and bulk, with a noise like the grinding of stones, then suddenly as soft as water flowing. And then I saw a little globe swaying up slowly from the depths, through the quiet water, smooth at first, and scarcely paler than its escorting ripples, then little by little a face, with holes for eyes and mouth and other wounds, and nothing to show if it was a man's face or a woman's face, a young face or an old face, or if it is calm too was not an effect of the water trembling between it and the light.³¹⁹

In *Malone Dies* (1951), there is a comparable mergence of the body with the environment, as Malone writes: 'the noises of nature, of mankind and even my own, were all jumbled together in one and the same unbridled gibberish.'³²⁰ With age Malone's body has become akin to a once servile now disobedient animal, or even an unresponsive piece of equipment as if he is not sequestered in but tele-operates his body:

I have demanded certain movements of my legs and even feet, I know them well and could feel the effort the made to obey, I have lived with them that little space of time, filled with drama, between the message received and the piteous response actually outside of the body in the environment.³²¹

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 137.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 190.

³²¹ Ibid., p. 176.

Like Molloy and particularly the unnamable, he exists in the interstice between wholeness/totality and disintegration, and is an identifiable and unidentifiable figure. It is unclear as to whether he is in private residence, an asylum, care home, or hospital. He is an immobile, incurious, and senescent character, 'neutral and inert,'³²² with no knowledge of his age or the nature of his confinement, just spending each day 'giv[ing] my body the old orders I know it cannot obey.'³²³ Again Beckett has little regard for causality and literary subjectivism; he offers little in the way of prehistory, character development, plot, structure, and so on, and seems to suffer equally from his impotent body, which he cannot animate, and the negligent narrator/creator, who keeps him in this 'habit of motionlessness.'³²⁴ Hence his predicament is endemic to his body and inflicted on his body from an external source, 'as if he were not master of his movements and did not know what he was doing, while he was doing it, nor what he had done, once he had done it.'³²⁵ However, the boundaries between inside and outside, victim and victimiser, are yet again rendered ambiguous as Malone is also a self-narrated character, and his writing has –for the reader, at least –existential overtones in much the same way as Winnie, the unnamable, and Krapp's loquaciousness have. Malone becomes an increasingly dimensionless and appendageless as he writes, and just as Molloy is reducible to his bicycle, the narrators are to stage lighting in *Play*, Krapp is to his tape, the unnamable is to telepresence technologies, and the invisible character in *Breath* is to the acoustic technologies, Malone's senescing, vegetating body and the glum fatalism of that deterioration is to the very instrument/prosthesis that brings him into existence –his pencil: '[s]o little by little my little pencil dwindles, inevitably, and the day is fast approaching when nothing will remain but a fragment too tiny to hold.'³²⁶ He envisions his body as such also: 'I would shrivel and shrivel, more and more, until in the end I could be almost buried in a

³²² Ibid., p. 165.

³²³ Ibid., p. 174.

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 224.

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 204.

casket, swelling.³²⁷ Like the aforementioned works, he is made indistinguishable from that which animates him, which implies some benign sameness or equivalence between body and mechanism. Malone's life is, so to speak, prosthetic in the sense that it is mediated –reducible to an instrument, in this case the pencil. He is a victim of what sedentariness and atrophy it brings about, yet these conditions are also self-determining –at once unwitting victim to and ultimate cause of his timely/untimely decay. As Virilio describes of a mediated and in particular telecommunicated existence:

[t]he insecurity of their *territorial hold* extends from the space of their own world to the space of their own body. Once this happens, adoption of a sedentary life tends to become final, absolute, since the functions traditionally distributed within the real space of the town are now exclusively taken over by the real time of the wiring of the human body.³²⁸

In other words, people render themselves immobile –a sedentariness Virilio likens to disability. Beckettian characters are not simply telepresent to the world as their presence seems mediated and their bodily functions substituted, but they are telepresent *to themselves* in such a way as to conjoin the technological and the pathological. Virilio describes disability 'by force of circumstance' and disability by 'circumstance of technology,'³²⁹ and if this is applied not to disability but to ageing then firstly a disjunction emerges between (bodily) age and time and secondly age is denaturalised as technological determinism takes the place of biological determinism. This is apparent throughout the trilogy as many of the trilogy bodies are abortive, amorphous and nontemporal –or at the very least fissured between youth and senescence: '[y]es, an old foetus, that's what I am now.'³³⁰ In *Malone Dies*, like in *The*

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

³²⁸ Virilio, *Open Sky*, p. 56.

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

³³⁰ *Trilogy*, p. 207.

Unnamable and to some extent *Lessness* also, the bodies constitute simply an arrangement geometric, quasi-mechanical figures, parts, or objects that move or, in the following case desire to move, as a sleek apparatus:

Where he would never have to rise again and hold himself erect in equilibrium, first on the right foot for example, then on the left, and where he might come and go and so survive after the fashion of a great cylinder endowed with the faculties of cognition and volition.³³¹

The narrator, whose body parts, at times receding or protrusive, automatised and inanimate, has little control over, or on occasion even knowledge of, his movements and excretions – many of which are in comic disproportion. To paraphrase Virilio, the narrator has no ‘territorial hold’ over his unruly and disorganised body:

But that is not all and my extremities are not the only parts to recede, in their respective directions, far from it. For my arse for example, which can hardly be accused of being the end of anything, if my arse suddenly started to shit at the present moment, which God forbid, I firmly believe the lumps would fall out in Australia.³³²

The dispositions, rhythms, and cadences of his body –and Beckettian bodies more generally – are demonstrably repulsive and profoundly alienating to the point where Beckett radically dehumanises perhaps the most universal and identifiable of human conditions: ageing.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 215

iii) **Conclusion: Ageing and Mortality as ‘mechanical fatality’³³³**

Beckett conceives space for the senescing body in his prose and plays within which no preconceived, preimposed categories or identities exist. Technology has an implied presence in many of the works of Samuel Beckett, and often it encroaches upon his imagery of ageing and mortality. Whilst technology might, certainly in terms of ageing, represent the antithesis to the human body, it is in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* a metaphor for ageing, alterity, and the sense of foreignness and aversiveness in moments of crisis or collapse.

Likewise, in Beckett’s dramaturgy, ageing and in particular cripplement and inertia are more situational than biological afflictions, extraneous not endemic to the body. Beckett does not permit a naturalistic setting when representing physical incapability or biological failure and, if one were to conceive of his *oeuvre* as in some way prophetic, the message would be that ageing has ceased to be a natural, gradual, degradative phenomenon, and is something self-(imposed), something instantaneous, something artificial, and what many would regard as emphatically un-Beckettian, something impermanent –even optional. There is a great deal of pathos that will always reside in Beckett’s visual and textual imagery; much of that imagery connotes the glum fatalism of biological determinism, but it is saturated with allusions to the possibility of cessation or respite –the possibility of triumphing over age. Beckett’s publisher and friend John Calder remarks of his work that ‘nowhere does he offer us a hopeful message.’³³⁴ Like Beckett’s bodies, his *oeuvre* is in part defined by but most importantly exceeds and at times contradicts that pathos. He offers the optionality and attendant optimism that contemporary western bourgeois culture has grown used to with the hopes and blandishments of anti-ageing, and their reification through medical, cosmetic, and pharmacological interventions. However, between his dramaturgical and his trilogy bodies, the idea of ageing as imposed on the body by an exogenous force is juxtaposed with allusions

³³³ Sartre, *A Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p. 219.

³³⁴ John Calder, *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, p. 1.

to technology. Beckett equates biological determinism with technological vitalism, gerontological with technological. Time and again, images of senescing bodies are suffused with allusions to technological annexation, and often this is evident in the characters' seemingly automatised physical postures, cadences, or actions. Beckett's characters senesce under duress and, as if equating the geriatric with its antithesis –the trans- or posthuman –he conflates dysfunctional limb with technological adjunct, the constrictive, aversive ageing body with allusions to technological instrumentality. Beckett resituates ageing and death within a technological, technophilic milieu, and confronts the pathos of old age in exactly the same instance he would seem to repudiate it, or offer some sense of a way out.

However, Beckett's depiction of inertia, cripplement, and ageing with recourse to technological or mechanical imagery does not mean this aspect of his writing is evasive, although such a reading is endemic to this sort of imagery. Philosophical work on technology highlights the ways in which technological use predicates a sort of agedness, or pseudo-senescence when man deigns to produce technology that renders the body obsolete or impotent. Concomitantly, what I think Beckett's imagery opens up is the possibility of thinking of the technological as constituting a fundamental part of the gerontological –a union Virilio often alludes to in his works, stating: '*The equipped invalid is thus paradoxically on a par with the overequipped able person.*'³³⁵ In Beckett's semiology of age, just like the relation of his stagecraft to the ordeal of ageing, the technological and gerontological seem indissociable at times. In his *oeuvre* the technological is quite emphatically untranscendent, primarily because his characters are not technologised humans but anthropomorphised machines, or 'humanised materialities'³³⁶ as Sartre terms it. In the same way the grim fatalism of ageing may foster a sense of enforced acquiescence to the inexorable passage of Time, William Leiss describes our relation to technological

³³⁵ Paul Virilio, *Polar Inertia*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 26.

³³⁶ Sartre, p. 169.

progressivism as ‘a vague sense of subjection to forces beyond our control.’³³⁷ Technology is a necrotic force, disempowering and depriving the body of its inherent functions and instigating a form of ageing comparable to but dissociated from time and nature – ‘the involution leading to inertia’³³⁸ as Virilio describes it in *Polar Inertia*. In *Speed and Politics* Virilio, discussing cars/transportation and describes ‘the animal body that disappears in the superpower of the metallic body’ that renders the human body inert, divesting it of its own powers of locomotion: ‘the mobile mass reduced to inaction.’ He describes ‘the doubly-unable body [...] deprived, as he has always been, of will, he now requires physical assistance from a vehicular prosthesis in order to accomplish his historical mission.’³³⁹ Virilio envisions a domiciliary inaction, a self-contrived, self-imposed sedentariness analogous to ageing which he speaks of in terms of the ‘[r]edundancy of man’s muscular strength in favour of the “machine tool,”’³⁴⁰ and the ‘substitute for bodily movement and an extension of domestic inertia which will mark the definitive triumph of sedentariness.’³⁴¹ This is what both William Leiss and Jean-Paul Sartre speak of in terms of ‘the practico-inert,’³⁴² where Man’s activity or potency is paradoxically the locus of inaction and surrogacy. In terms of what technology divests the body of, Sartre describes the machine as ‘a strange and living being with its own customs and its own movement,’ which is what, at times, Beckett’s characters seem to be inhumed within. He then goes on to describe how ‘the vampire object constantly absorbs human action, lives on blood taken from man and finally lives in symbiosis with him. It derives all its physical properties, including temperature, from human action’³⁴³ –the allusions to vampirism expressive of that which technology divests the body of.

³³⁷ William Leiss, *Under Technology's Thumb* (Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), p. 6.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³³⁹ Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), p. 62.

³⁴⁰ Virilio, *Open Sky*, p. 19.

³⁴¹ Virilio, *Polar Inertia*, p. 18.

³⁴² William Leiss, *Under Technology's Thumb*, p. 70.

³⁴³ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p. 169.

Beckett's prescient literature offers a rudimentary image of Man's compulsion to inactivity that, for some philosophers, come to define late 20th- and early 21st century society. Ageing and physical maladies in the Beckett canon are rarely normal, innate, unconditioned processes; they are imposed, manufactured, and instantaneous, dissociated from time and emanating from a force tangential to, and very rarely within, the characters' bodies. His prose and dramaturgy presents and sustains the intrinsically paradoxical equivalence of ageing and technology that is, increasingly, coming to characterise 21st century anti-technological discourses: the nihilistic fixation of the populace on sedentariness, atrophy, physical decline, and assisted living that, through deliberate and wilful dependence on the self-substituting devices, they contrive for themselves. It is a danger that pervades Beckett's art as it becomes impossible to tell whether his aesthetics of failure takes its lead from the ordeal of ageing, or spitefully and vindictively inflicts it upon its unsuspecting, otherwise plaintively sempiternal characters.

THE PROSTHETIC VISION OF AGE: SEMIOLOGIES OF AGE AND THE ILLUSION OF TRANSCENDENCE IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY PROSE

*[Pain] shows us, too, how those around us
Do not, and cannot, share
Our being; though men talk animatedly
And challenge silence with laughter*

*And women bring their engendering smiles
And eyes of famous mercy,
These kind things slide away
Like rain beating on a filthy window*

*When pain interposes.*³⁴⁴

This chapter addresses the ways in which modern and contemporary writers conceptualise organic decay and the aversiveness, foreignness, and constrictiveness of age-related pain. My primary texts include: Edward Bellamy's 'The Old Folks' Party' (1898), John David California's *60 Years Later: Coming through the Rye* (2009), Philip Larkin's poem 'Skin' from *The Less Deceived*, Kingsley Amis' *Ending Up* (1972), Alice Sebold's *The Almost Moon* (2007), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (1922). I shall focus on the ways in which the image of the prosthesis governs writers' visual lexicon of ageing, especially when depicting the altered, heightened, unruly, or aversive sense of embodiment occurring in moments of pain, dysfunction, and collapse. I will discuss the 'prosthesis' in terms of the kinaesthetics and coenesthetics of the unresponsive, senescing body. The prosthesis, I will argue, denotes a visceral, sensory event occurring *within* the body, rather than a physical adjunct or annexation always secondary to it. The prosthesis, then, is not a physical, literal addition but

³⁴⁴John Updike, 'Pain', *The New Republic*, 26 December 1983, p. 34.

the *sensation* of addition or alterity brought about by the distinctiveness of pain and the defamiliarising postures it compels one to take. Moreover, I will discuss how the aforementioned writers confer aspects of senescence onto the physical world and its milieu of objects and structures, and thus how the physical environment becomes constitutive of an extended, maladroit, prosthetic body and recapitulates aspects of the characters' corporeality. At the core of this chapter will be the paradoxes inherent in this prosthetic vision, and I shall speak of how the image of the prosthesis both expresses the realities and pathos of age, but also how, in the displacement of the flesh, constitutes a semiological transcendence of age.

Conventionally, the prosthesis is understood as a device, either external or implanted, that substitutes for or supplements a missing or defective part of the body. It helps to meliorate suffering, yet might also be construed as a metonym *for* suffering. The prosthesis may include:

dentures, dental implants, assistive technologies, toupees, the artificial larynx, silastic penile prosthesis for sexual impotence, artificial ears, noses, and hands [...] the cochlear implant, vibrators, eyeglasses, contact lenses, the intraoral obturator, and the wheelchair.³⁴⁵

Whether it is associated with pain and dysfunction or used to cure or palliate it, the prosthesis inescapably reminds us of the constitutive frailty of the body and its susceptibility to decline, and represents the fullest measure of *physical* presence. The prosthesis substitutes, alters, enhances, and rehabilitates, and conveys an ideology about the body –specifically the *wholeness* of the body. The prosthesis is also associated with the pathologies and sobriety of old age. Simon de Beauvoir describes the senescing body as a confluence of prostheses: ‘he

³⁴⁵ Katherine Ott (ed.), ‘The Sum of Its Parts: An Introduction to Modern Histories of Prosthetics’ in *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2002), p. 7.

needs artificial assistance to carry out his natural functions –false teeth, spectacles, hearing aids, walking sticks.³⁴⁶ The image of the prosthesis is rife in Simon Biggs’ sociological account of postmodernity, in which he describes the mature identity as the ‘sum of an arbitrary collection of constructed identities’ and, citing Munro (1996), a “‘complex process of prosthesis.’”³⁴⁷ The range of accoutrements available to the consumer allow for the construction of multiple, and perhaps *ageless* identities: ‘consumer culture,’ Biggs argues, ‘supplies the props and the environment, allowing the construction of an eternal present, with no centre, origin or destination.’³⁴⁸ The prosthesis, then, supplies a deficiency, is a monument *to* that loss, and exists to a certain degree under a sign of mourning; yet the prosthesis fosters the construction of *new* identities –a physical locus of identity that is continuously deferred, an identity spread across different substrates that exceeds the prophylactic containment of the constitutively fragile body. In *Of Grammatology* Jacques Derrida describes the supplement as a cohabitation of opposites –something that revives a presence yet exists under a sign of absence:

The supplement supplements. It adds only to replace [...] if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence [...] As a substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness.

Somewhere, something can be filled up *of itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. by Patrick O’Brian (London & New York: W.W Norton & Company Inc., 1996), p. 305.

³⁴⁷ Simon Biggs/Munro, *The Mature Imagination: Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 59.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London & Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 145.

What I argue in this chapter is that the prosthesis denotes a sensory event occurring in the unresponsive, senescing body. Virginia Woolf describes how the healthy body is experientially absent, subliminal, or intermissive – a nullpoint that tends toward self-concealment in moments of health and wellbeing. One’s relation to the healthy body, she implies, is one of tacit self-command, and as such the habitual body is unperceived; it is ‘a sheet of plain glass *through which* the soul looks [my italics].’³⁵⁰ By contrast, whilst the aversiveness of pain does not necessarily change the body *physically*, kinaesthetically the body emerges as an unruly presence as the individual becomes more acutely conscious of it. Like the paradox of the prosthesis, an overbearing presence is borne out of and indeed becomes synonymous with deficiency or lack. In *The Five Senses* Michel Serres articulates pain in terms of noise and silence: ‘my organs fall silent –health returns. Illness comes upon me when my organs can hear each other.’³⁵¹ Leder, too, in his theory of ‘dys-appearance’ describes the healthy body as recessive, unconscious or experientially invisible, and describes how the ailing body constitutes an oppressive emergence, ‘an *alien presence* that exerts upon us a *telic demand*.’³⁵² The sick body, then, is preemptory; it is an impasse, and not something *through* which one acts but *in* which one is inhumed. Woolf describes how one ‘cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant,’ and how the afflicted ‘must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness.’³⁵³ The transition from health to ill-health is marked by the transition from the body’s subliminality and one’s tacit self-control to its kinaesthetic and articular presence, where ‘one’s limbs come to feel like heavy prostheses, as if movements must be attended to and actively willed.’³⁵⁴ Thus, pain

³⁵⁰ Virginia Woolf, ‘On Being Ill’ in *Collected Essays*, vol. 4 (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), p. 193

³⁵¹ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*, trans. by Margaret Sankey & Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 85.

³⁵² Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (London: University of Chicago Press, Ltd., 1990), p. 71.

³⁵³ Woolf, ‘On Being Ill’, p. 193.

³⁵⁴ Leder, *The Absent Body*, p. 84

is bound up in an overbearing awareness of one's status as an embodied subject, and of the interiority and invisible, visceral geographies³⁵⁵ comprising physical existence. However, like with the presence/absence dichotomy in the prosthesis, the individual, though burdened by an aversive body-consciousness, is also self-removed as the defamiliarising sensations associated with pain introduce an element of distance from the 'habitual' body. The sufferer is called upon to attend *to* the body, and they perceive their body, or relate to it, in a manner comparable to the objectifications of the modern physician.³⁵⁶ Through conjecture, entailment, interpretation, or investigation – what Leder terms 'corporeal hermeneutics'³⁵⁷ – the individual desires to understand or regain control of, in essence cure or return to its habitual absence, a body acting as if under the tyranny and hegemony of external control. The afflicted limb, for instance, is comparable to an embodied technology or prosthesis, undifferentiated from the totality of the body yet eliciting a sense of alterity, inauthenticity, and self-differentiation. The totality does not take precedence over the parts of the body, but the parts take precedence over the totality. The body ceases to exist as a set of mutual relations, then, with its parts, or part, emerging as an affective presence, or call, that disrupts the recessive wholeness experienced in health.

In *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder describes how pain and dysfunction cause a 'disruption and constriction of one's habitual world' and engender 'a new relation to one's body.'³⁵⁸ It is this 'new relation' that is at the heart of this chapter on prosthetic visions of pain in narratives of ageing, and I shall explore it in three sections: 'Affliction and Theatricality', 'Architecture and Domestic Furnishings', and 'Marionettes and Simulacral Youth'. In the first section I will explore the relationship between dysfunction and theatricality, the gerontological and the

³⁵⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 3.

³⁵⁶ Leder, *The Absent Body*, p. 77.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

dramaturgical. I will argue that the senescing body is constitutive of an emergent performance, and consider the image of the over-garment as a semiotic phantom of the ageing body. In the second section I will explore the altered kinaesthetic and articular impressions of the body in moments of pain and unresponsiveness, focussing in particular on how the writers create a sense of *physical* distance and externalise the innermost sensations and geographies of the dysfunctional body. I will analyse the conflation of the architectural and the anatomical, focussing on how the external features of the house –its furnishings and architectural occlusions –work as an extended, prosthetic body, recapitulating aspects of the corporal form. I will argue that the physical environment, notably worn or dilapidated architecture and the milieu of broken or eroded objects or furnishings, function as a topography of the ageing body, and examine the novels’ semiology of age alongside trans- and posthumanist discourses. The paradox in this section that I shall study is that pain and infirmity –conditions that inescapably remind us of our mortality –are often depicted with recourse to *inorganic* objects or structures. In the aforementioned literature the aged body is dispersed, spread out entropically, or perhaps *posthumanly*, across different substrates. The ageing bodies I shall explore in this section resist all holistic or associationist definitions; they are represented as excrescent, non-human, and their bodies are an ever deferred whole spread out across different, non-biological substrates that embody a permanence that, ironically, goes on to metaphorise the maladies and infelicities of the flesh. The senescing bodies are presented not as a totality, ‘its parts [...] enveloped in each other’ over which the individual is ‘in undivided possession,³⁵⁹’ but a disjunctive, unruly confluence of prostheses comparable to an amorphous yet unsettlingly anthropomorphised structure subjugated to external control. Moreover, sexuality and gender do not emerge through such discourse on ageing, since the prosthetic vision divests the body of form and of boundaries, and renders the senescing body

³⁵⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility’ in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 112.

increasingly unassignable. The final section of this chapter takes up this theme of dispossession and alterity in age, analysing how the dysfunctional body works and exists as if under the hegemony of ‘occupying force[s].’³⁶⁰ I will explore the notion of carer as supplement, and puppet imagery in realist narratives of ageing both in terms of the humanising of the prosthesis and the prostheticising of the human. The overall objective of this chapter is to show how non-human structures are used to explore the infelicities of age – what I have termed the *prosthetic vision of age* – and to examine how the prosthetic vision fosters mutually contradictory images of ageing: that is, conveying pathos, alterity, and abjection in old age, yet simultaneously rewriting the traditional realist narratives of ageing in which these images prevail as circumspectly science-fictional, as germane, even, to trans- and posthuman discourses. In short, I shall examine how the prosthetic vision of age offers a fundamentally conflicted and irresolute representation of later life, fixated on the pathos and abjection of old age but with recourse to images that belie its objective realities and, like Beckett’s tormentful, faux senescence, imply its transcendence.

i) Affliction and Theatricality

*If a face retained its linear form, white hair replacing blond or black sufficed to make it look like that of another. Theatrical costumiers know that a powdered wig so dis-guises a person as to make him unrecognisable.*³⁶¹

Pain is the ‘seed of a body-self division.’³⁶² I would like to explore physical dysfunctionality and the affectivity of aesthetic change in terms of theatricality and performativity. After seeing an old photograph of himself Nathaniel Hawthorne describes how: ‘I was really a little

³⁶⁰ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, p. 82.

³⁶¹ Marcel Proust, ‘Time Regained’ in *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 2, trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff & Stephen Hudson (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2006), p. 1202

³⁶² *Ibid.* p. 70

startled at recognising myself so *apart* from myself [my emphasis].³⁶³ Photography embalms time, rescuing the body from the corruption and vicissitudes of age; and as he dotes on the photograph's invariance – a symbol, perhaps, for ludic fantasies of immortality – so different is the photographic image from the body with which he holds and looks at that image, that his examination of his own image becomes a continuation of the neutrality and objectivity of the gaze of the other. This differential sense of identity in which one's subjective self-image belies one's objective body-image is depicted by Simone de Beauvoir in the following terms: 'So long as the inner feeling of youth remains alive [...] it is the objective truth of age that seems fallacious: one has the impression of having put on a borrowed mask.'³⁶⁴ The Roman poet Juvenal depicts the ageing body as an abject carapace, and even conveys age in ostensibly dysgenic terms:

What a train of woes – and such woes – comes with a prolonged old age. To begin with, this deformed, hideous, unrecognizable face; this vile leather instead of skin; these pendulous cheeks; these wrinkles like those around the mouth of an old she-ape as she sits scratching in the shady Thabarcan woods.³⁶⁵

There is an unsettling sense of alterity and excrescence in age, as if the senescing body is a secondary, debased, and carapacial addition – the 'perception of bodily ageing as a mask'³⁶⁶ – within which the individual remains the unwitting occupant. In *Ageing in Society* sociologists Skinner and Vaughan depict ageing as a hyperbolic, caricatural corporeity where the body is equated to an assembly of maladaptive, disunified parts simply juxtaposed in space and approximating bodily functions like a series of disturbing mechanical uncannies: 'if you want to know what it feels like to be old, you should smear dirt on your glasses, stuff cotton in

³⁶³ Nathaniel Hawthorne cited by Celia Lury, 'Retrodictive Prophecy', *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory, and Identity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 46.

³⁶⁴ de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 296.

³⁶⁵ Quoted by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Coming of Age*, pp. 121-2.

³⁶⁶ Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: The Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 62.

your ears, put on heavy shoes that are too big for you and wear gloves.³⁶⁷ This sense of artifice is conveyed by André Gide in his journal entry of 6th March 1941:

My soul has remained young to such a degree that I constantly feel as if the septuagenarian I indubitably am is a role I am playing; and the infirmities and failings that remind me of my age come along like a prompter to call it to my mind when I might be inclined to forget it. Then, like the good actor I want to be, I slip back into character and pride myself on playing the part well.³⁶⁸

The senescing body, for Gide, is akin to a spurious over-garment and, describing it as such, he conveys the ageing process as an obligatory or coercive performance he ‘slips’ into with jovial acquiescence: his behaviour scripted by the malign and iniquitous additions of age, and his very countenance a strange and counterintuitive affectation. His body does not mediate his sense of self in the way writing and speech mediates thought; rather, it misrepresents and is in excess of it. There is a clear distinction between the vicissitudes of the body and the obvious sense of continuity in his subjective self-image, and this is captured in the metaphor of performance. Simone de Beauvoir describes the discontinuities in rate at which we age:

...the physical and mental aspects do not follow a strictly parallel development. An individual may have suffered important mental impairment before his physical decline begins; or, the contrary, it is possible that during this decline he may make important intellectual acquisitions.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁷ Multiple Contributors, *Ageing in Society: An Introduction to Social Gerontology*, ed. by John Bond et al., 2nd edn. (London: Sage Publications, 1993), p. 317

³⁶⁸ André Gide, *Journals 1889-1949*, trans. and edited by Justin O’Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967), p. 667.

³⁶⁹ de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 12.

Gide conveys this sense of self-division through the allusions to performativity and theatricality, as if age has rudely interposed itself; but although Gide's descriptions convey both a sense of biological fact and cultural obligation, the word *ageing* takes on more positive connotations. The description conflates notions of embodiment with theatrical departure or aloofness, and ultimately the pathos and determinism of age with the promise of cessation or respite as implied in the twin metaphors of costume and performance –that is, a costume that can be removed; a performance that can be discontinued. The sense of coercion and obligation in this evocation are, as I suggest, both physiological and cultural in origin. The speaker ages under duress: coerced by the limitations of the body, which encroach upon and dictate what he can/cannot do, as well as by a sense of duty to conform or acquiesce to cultural expectations of the elderly. The notion of artifice thus signifies a sense of foreignness brought about by the aversiveness of age and its pathologies; yet it also reveals how ageing is not 'solely a biological, but also a cultural fact'³⁷⁰ or cultural contrivance –as demonstrated in his obligation to *act his age*. This obligation represents a striving toward wholeness and totality, however: if fragmentation implies a dualism or antagonism, a breaking down, or decay, of a whole, then his acquiescing to age is suggestive of a symbolic return to health – his behaviour reflecting rather than contradicting the appearance of his body. Even though the allusions to performativity convey coercion or compulsion, whether physical or psychological, they still offer the possibility of escape or respite –the overcoming or transcendence of age correlated with the costume's removal or the act's discontinuance. This quotation, then, both expresses and repudiates the realities of ageing –fosters allusions to age-transcendence in the selfsame instance it proffers a more essentialist, fatalistic portrayal. In essence, the discontinuities between his subjective self-image and objective body-image are gained through the obvious contradictions between Gide's semiology of age, which gestures

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

toward impermanence and artifice –or in other words, agelessness –and the allusions to enforced obligation in his *thematic* exploration of age. This is also implicit in the following quotation by J.B Priestley who, when asked what it feels like to be old, responded:

It is as though, walking down Shaftesbury Avenue as a fairly young man, I was suddenly kidnapped, rushed into a theatre and made to don the grey hair, the wrinkles and the other attributes of age, then wheeled on stage. Behind the appearance of age I am the same person, with the same thoughts as when I was younger.³⁷¹

Both Gide and Priestley juxtapose the natural and the synthetic, pathos and performativity, and Priestley's alternation of the tenses of verbs and juxtaposition of 'I was' and 'I am' in the concluding sentence does give some sense of the coexistence of younger self-image and a older body-image. Despite the covert optimism in this juxtaposition, however, his concluding in the past tense –which evokes a sense of nostalgia or sentimentality –undermines the positivity implied in present tense –which evokes a possessive individualism and sense of continuity. Whilst psychological and physiological age is represented in the oscillating past/present tense, the submission to age and organic decay is represented as 'I am' slowly merges into the distant, prospective 'I will be', to the retrospective 'I was'. The body seems to signify at once abjection and transcendence inasmuch as the 'attributes' of senescence such as wrinkles are likened to a costume, a pseudo-epidermis that renders the individual aged and potentially ageless. Even the noun 'theatre' evokes jointly medical and dramaturgical, surgical and theatrical allusions, the first working on or in the body through its epidermal layers and visceral depths, and the latter *over* the body adding layers of performance. Similar to André Gide, Priestley seems to suggest that there is something manifestly inauthentic

³⁷¹ J.B. Priestley, quoted by Simon Biggs in *The Mature Imagination*, p. 76.

about a senescing body, especially when, as de Beauvoir describes, its development does not parallel the minds. What we have in both examples is a hyperbolic disunion of body from mind, and the ensuing transformation of the individual from persona to personae with the constitution of the body as a separate identity and hence a secondary presence coexisting alongside of, or *over*, the self. Although theatricality is an inherently problematic expression of ageing, the theatrical distance between self-image and body-image, like that between oneself and the character one depicts, is nevertheless an interesting expression of the experiential departure from the habitual body. Thus one might term the senescing body, in the sense that Gide and Priestley conceive it, as a pathological theatricality. This is conveyed in de Beauvoir's description in *The Coming of Age*:

within me it is the Other –that is to say the person I am for the outsider –who is old: and that Other is myself [...] Old age is more apparent to others than to the subject himself: it is a new state of biological equilibrium, and if the ageing individual adapts himself to it smoothly he does not notice change.³⁷²

In *The Language of Clothes*, Alison Lurie writes of clothes that 'self-protection has become a more and more important aspect of costume' and that the 'body is often disguised rather than revealed by protective layers of cloth.'³⁷³ In Gide and Priestley's descriptions, however, pathology and performance, body and costume, are synonymous, blurring the boundaries between the visceral and the theatrical, the natural and the synthetic, historiated skin and ill-fitting over-garment. This suggests at once the anthropomorphising of the synthetic and the prostheticising of the natural: the retrograde alterations, such as wrinkling skin, 'muscular stiffness and the fragility of the bones,'³⁷⁴ at once aversive, kinaesthetic presences and pseudo-natural *additions* to the body comparable to surfeit of maladaptive prostheses. In

³⁷² Ibid., p. 284.

³⁷³ Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2000), p. xiv.

³⁷⁴ de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 29.

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* we do not have this. The ageing monarch's regality is the sum of his clothes, and as he cries '[o]ff, off, you lendings: come, unbutton here,'³⁷⁵ it is clear that the removal of his clothes correlates to his acquiescence to age and his fall into disrepute. In tearing off his clothes he becomes, in the words of editor R.A. Foakes, a 'pathetic senior citizen,' representative not of a nation, but 'the pathos of an old man.'³⁷⁶ For Gide and Priestley, however, we do not appear to have that differentiation between costume and body; rather the senescent body *is* a costume, alluding to the sense of addition borne through the body's clothing and adornment yet implying the weakness and vulnerability metaphorised in the *uncovered* body. There is a play on notions of presence and absence, as age is depicted as a malign, arbitrary burden or imposition not internal to but extraneous to the body. However, this sense of addition is used to express decay, wasting musculature, loss or impairment of the senses, and a clear sense of diminishment.

In many traditional realist narratives of ageing, the senescing body is depicted in demonstrably materialist terms, classified as an explicit, oppressive emergent presence, indistinguishable from –and often metaphorised in –the milieu of broken, eroded objects. In *Somewhere Towards the End* (2008), Diana Athill subtly conflates the cultural and pathological in her descriptions of senescent 'uniforms', writing:

In my grandmothers' day a woman over seventy adopted what almost amounted to a uniform. If she was a widow she wore black or grey clothes that disregarded fashion, and even if she had a husband her garments went a bit drab and shapeless, making it clear that this person no longer attempted to be attractive.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R.A Foakes (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2005), 3:4, 106, p. 279.

³⁷⁶ R.A Foakes, 'Introduction', *King Lear*, pp. 27-9.

³⁷⁷ Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End* (London: Granta Books, 2009), p. 13.

Clothes, here, work as a ceremonial declaration of age; a metaphor for the senescing, devirilized body they both cover and reveal. The uniform connotes sameness and anonymity, a sense of shared fate, with ‘old women [...] announcing by their appearance that they had become a different kind of person.’³⁷⁸ The description is reminiscent of W.B. Yeats’ description of the ‘mortal dress’ when describing age: ‘An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick.’ He externalises interior, retrograde biological processes of age, his xyloid metaphor expressing his wasting musculature and skeletal thinness, and the weathered over-garment his wrinkled, historiated skin. Like the metaphor of the photograph, and the allusions to costume and performativity, the individual, at once embodied and disembodied, has a prosthetic relation to his body, being simply ‘fastened to a dying animal [my italics].’³⁷⁹ All of these descriptions, like those of Gide and Priestley, convey the pathos and infelicities of age, but with recourse to images implying the possibility of cessation.

In his poem ‘Skin’ from the collection *The Less Deceived*, Philip Larkin presents the ageing skin as pseudo-epidermis. He couples skin and theatricality in this poem, representing it as not a part of but in addition to the body, removable as any part, clothing, or accessory might be: ‘an obedient daily dress’ that ‘must thicken, work loose / Into an old bag.’³⁸⁰ The title of the poem, being as terse and uncomplicated as it is, allows Larkin to speak of organic decay in unbroken metaphor with no direct allusions to the flesh, to skin –that is, without recourse to *any* natural imagery, without recourse, even, to senescence. As an entirely metaphorical exposition, the linguistic processes involved in metaphor, in contrast to literal speech, subtly challenge, if not repudiate, the subject matter. Metaphor –the Greek prefix ‘meta-’ meaning above or beyond –implies a sense of overcoming. The ‘obedient daily dress’ is a paralogical metaphor, in which the organic and the synthetic –biological determinism and the prospect of

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p.14.

³⁷⁹ W.B. Yeats, *W.B. Yeats: Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2000), p. 66

³⁸⁰ Philip Larkin, ‘Skin’, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber and The Marvell Press, 2003), p. 73. Line numbers will be given parenthetically.

its deliberate and wilful discontinuance –are juxtaposed. In conflating costume and epidermis, Larkin depicts the body *plus* and the body *minus* –in other words, conveying the body’s physical wastage versus one’s consciousness of it, which constitutes an oppressive, emergent presence. One might say that this poem itself is dysfunctional in the sense that the clothing/costume conceit contradicts the pathos, gritty determinism, and sense of coercion he is depicting. He describes youthful skin as an ‘unfakable young surface’ (l. 3), yet in forgoing direct allusions to the organic and refusing to narrate ageing *in the flesh*, so to speak, he not only makes this poem a subtly evasive one, but depicts ageing skin using metaphors suggestive of its opposite: agelessness. The synthetic ‘daily dress’, whilst it does erode and thus convey an ‘age’ or a sense of ageing, does not exhibit a biological age. Larkin prostheticises the skin by viewing it as a pseudo-natural addition to the body, transforming it figuratively into a potentially ‘young surface’. The skin appears to be the addressee in the poem, separated from the speaker by the nominative ‘you’: ‘you cannot always keep / That unfakable young surface. /You must learn your lines’ (l. 2-4). The skin is presented as another body, constituting a second person perhaps, which is implied and represented in the dialogic nature of the poem. It is ambiguous as to whether he is speaking *of* time, lamenting the retrograde changes to *his* body, or *as* time, as inflicting or even commanding those changes on *a* body: ‘you must thicken, work loose /Into an old bag’ (l. 9-10). In the final stanza, this is not resolved, as the speaker addresses his skin, and suggests the body changes and deteriorates not because of a natural inclination to senescence, but because of the body’s malign sentience and autonomous command –ageing as if out of spite. His relation to his body is one of disturbing, paranoid alienation, yet also has the familiarity and relative benignity of an argument with a spouse: ‘And pardon me, that /I could find, when you were new, /No brash festivity /To wear you at’ (l.13-6). He also writes ‘you must learn your lines’ (4), a *double entendre* coupling physiology and theatricality, his wrinkled, historiated skin,

and a script or scripted performance. In *The Book of Skin*, Steven Connor describes ‘the very wholeness that the skin possesses and preserves, its capacity to resume and summarize the whole body.’ He moves on to argue that this ‘means that it is always in excess of, out in front of the body [...] as *another body*.’³⁸¹ Larkin’s evocation is comparable, particularly in his likening skin to a removable over-garment, and secondly in the dialogic nature of the poem, which gives the body-self relation in this poem the quality of argument or even sciamachy (the act or instance of fighting a shadow or imaginary adversary). This notion of the body as adversary is reflected in the following interview in *The Ageless Self* with Ida, aged 92:

SK: Tell me about being old.

IDA: There’s this feeling of being out of one’s skin. The feeling that you are not in your own body. I find myself acting in unfamiliar ways. Doing things that aren’t familiar to me. And generally, having an outlook that doesn’t seem to be my usual outlook. In a kind of way, disorientated.³⁸²

Larkin’s poem’s representation of age is ambivalent, then, as it conveys a sense of resistance to his embodiment, yet renders the attributes of age, namely wrinkles, as separable from him or even, in their disposition to age, a malign agency that can potentially be argued into submission. Thus, the speaker is both an ‘anonymous symbol of biological human fate,’³⁸³ and a potentially ageless figure.

The themes of performativity, dissimulation, pretence, and optionality are dramatised in Edward Bellamy in ‘The Old Folks’ Party’. This is a story about a group of friends who decide to ‘dress up to resemble what we expect to look like fifty years hence, and study our demeanour to correspond to what we expect to be and feel like at that time [...] to talk over

³⁸¹ Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (USA: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 29.

³⁸² Sharon R. Kaufman, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 8.

³⁸³ Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 31.

old times and recall what we can, if anything, of our vanished youth.³⁸⁴ Clearly arguing against any holistic conceptions of identity in age, Bellamy comments on the existential challenges presented by organic decay, and draws attention, interestingly, to how both ‘the fragile tenure of the sense of personal identity’³⁸⁵ and the surfeit of identities amassed through time are reflected grammatically:

...there are half a dozen of each of us, or a dozen if you please, one in fact for each epoch of our life, and each slightly or wholly different from the others. Each one of these epochs is foreign and inconceivable to the others, as ourselves at seventy now are to us [...] So that the different periods of life are to all intents and purposes different persons, and the first person of grammar ought to be used only with reference to the present tense. What we were, or shall be, or do, belongs strictly to the third person [...] The three persons of grammar are really not enough. A fourth is needed to distinguish the ego of the past and future from the present ego which is the only true one.³⁸⁶

In dressing up as septuagenarians, there is a convergence of present and future selves that is comparable to gerontological rhetoric on psychological ageing and the subjective feeling of youth versus physiological ageing and the objective realities of age. Perhaps instead of a fourth person of grammar, we might suggest that the third person ‘he/she’, or even the plural ‘they’, is more befitting the ostensible fluidity and disarticulation of the self. The retention of the first-person ‘I’ or the possessive pronoun ‘my’ contrives a sense of wholeness and unity, yet belies the sense of alterity and self-differentiation in the vicissitudes of age. The narrator comments how: ‘we shall doubtless have changed, as much in disposition as in appearance

³⁸⁴ Edward Bellamy, ‘The Old Folks’ Party’ *The Blindman’s World and Other Stories* (BiblioLife Publishers, 2009), p. 60.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64

[...] Just think how different sets of faculties and tastes develop and decay, come into prominence and retire into the background.’³⁸⁷ There is at least some vestige of wholeness here in the sense that their mental age reflects rather than contradicts their physical age. In the context of the Gide and Priestley’s depiction of age, one might suggest of ‘The Old Folks’ Party’ that realism and counterrealism converge and even become synonymous. The aged bodies here may constitute a benign performance, a theatrical projection into the future; but that sense of theatricality and fallaciousness, albeit a more malign force, also characterises traditional realist evocations of age—as indeed we see with Priestly and Gide. This is arguably implied as Bellamy *naturalises* the counterfeit septuagenary, which is ‘illustrated by the ease at which actors can put themselves in the place of the characters they assume, so that even their instinctive demeanour corresponds to the ideal, and their acting becomes nature.’³⁸⁸ The relationship between body and mind, then, is one of correspondence rather than incongruity, but with a much more ambivalent relation between the natural and counterfeit identities, and present and prospective selves. For example, Bellamy writes of one character, Mary, how ‘it indicated how fully she had realized her part that, as she passed the mirror, no involuntary start testified to surprise at the aged figure it reflected,’³⁸⁹ suggesting an encroaching custom and verisimilitude.

The imposition of the foreign other characterises John David California’s depiction of ageing, and particularly skin in his novel *60 Years Later: Coming Through the Rye*. In this he offers a sense of anonymity and, like Diana Athill, uniformity, describing the ‘average old man,’ who consists of ‘gray hair, shrivelled skin and dried up bones.’³⁹⁰ Like the previous writers mentioned, California surreptitiously displaces conventional prostheses associated with old

³⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

³⁹⁰ John David California, *60 Years Later: Coming Through the Rye* (UK: Windupbird Publishing, 2009), p. 225.

age such as false teeth, hearing aids, walking sticks, and wheelchairs, for the dysfunctional body parts themselves. This novel is an unauthorized sequel to J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), examining the relationship between Salinger and Holden Caulfield, with Caulfield envisaged as a 70 year old man. There is indeed a self-consciousness to the aged character, Mr. C, as he wakes up to an unfamiliar senescent body that he immediately begins to pathologise: 'perhaps I'm getting the flu or something, that's why I feel heavy all over and my back hurts.'³⁹¹ The novel comprises the same lexical choices as *The Catcher in the Rye* – phrases and colloquialisms such as 'and all' and 'phony' –and so the representation of Mr C is fissured: at once a nostalgic evocation of his 1951 counterpart, and an intensely defamiliarising rewriting. This process of rewriting or re-narration is bound inextricably in the representation of age, and the antipathy between his subjective self-image (Caulfield) and his objective body-image (Mr C) is represented in the novel's intertextuality. California describes age as a process of dispossession and alterity, and his refusal to accept his body as his own offers a sly fictional self-consciousness as at times, it seems, the character is aware his identity has been reappropriated:

My skin is all prickly and covered with tiny dark spots, almost like freckles, and it's loose and saggy, like my arms have shrunk two sizes during the night and my skin hasn't had time to catch up. The veins on top of my hands are really visible, I mean, they sort of bulge out, and around my knuckles the skin has become wrinkled and scrunched together [...] These aren't my arms.³⁹²

That Salinger rejected this novel, disowning his now senescent character, offers an interesting, if inadvertent, parallel with the character's own relation to his body, which he also rejects. Mr C is, then, at once an invalid and *invalid* character as the matter of his

³⁹¹ Ibid., p. 14

³⁹² Ibid., p. 18.

senescence is coupled with the antagonisms surrounding the novel's very publication. Throughout *60 Years Later* Caulfield –anonymised by the abbreviated 'Mr. C', as indeed the author, Fredrik Colting, is by his pseudonym, J. D. California –is struck by moments of almost Shellyean monstrosity, writing: 'I've become some sort of monster with rotting flesh.'³⁹³ The flesh, but perhaps much more so the skin, is of particular significance. The skin is likened to a garment, a faux epidermis analysed by the de-subjectified gaze of Mr C.: 'my skin, my hair, my face, my everything is covered in an old man's body [...] my skin has turned into a sagging yellow bag.'³⁹⁴ Mr C goes on to write: 'It's not me looking back at me, but an old man. My skin, my hair, my face, my everything is covered in an old man's body,'³⁹⁵ and often describes the feel of his skin: 'I pinch my arm and this skin I'm in is so soft and loose that I get a good piece of it between my fingers.'³⁹⁶ The body-self dualism seems akin at times to a costume/role dynamic, and just as Larkin implies double presence in his poem's discursivity, so too does California, not simply in the sense that Mr C is an intertextual repetition of Caulfield, but in the fact the novel oscillates between standard typeset and italicised fragments. These fragments seem to represent a (benign/malign) third-person omniscience: '*Look at the little rabbit, a young boy in an old man's cloak, he doesn't suspect a thing [...] Even though I'm the one holding all the strings, I don't know what happens to them when we let them be without care for so long.*'³⁹⁷ This portentous extra-diegetic gaze is suggestive of authorial control, but also embodies the sense of neutrality and detachment that the character Mr C –diminished in name as well as in body –feels towards his body. There are allusions to ventriloquism in the italicised passage which map onto the aversive, unruly nature of his body, existing as if under external control. Senescence, and in particular paraesthesia (abnormal sensation in the skin such as tingling or numbness) elicit a

³⁹³ Ibid., p. 19

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

sense of metafictional self-commentary –his sense of diminishment and alterity corresponding to a subliminal awareness that his identity is but an intertextual echo and has little substance of its own:

*This very moment he is nothing really but empty space. He is like a piece of paper upon which you have once started a story, and then locked in a box and buried deep in the ground. Now, 60 years later, you dig that same box up and continue the story [...] I have to build him from where I left off. I have to give him a past for the simple reason that you can't kill what doesn't exist.*³⁹⁸

Mr C's degree of self-recognition is partial and the sociological metaphor of the mask, where the body is represented as covering or dissimulating one's fundamental identity, is applicable: 'I think I can see parts of myself when I look in the mirror. I couldn't at first, but now that I keep staring at one detail at a time until my eyes go blurry, I think I can see parts of myself under all that old stuff.'³⁹⁹ His pain precludes any tacit-self command whereby, as described by Woolf and Leder, he might act unconsciously or absently *through* his body, and instead he labours under a maladroit corporeality, which seems analogous to a burdensome, ill-fitting costume, just as senescence is to role or characterisation. Despite the heavy maladroit intrusion of the body, California also describes how Mr C is lateralized, removed from his body. He describes his senescing, unruly, and aversive body almost as a vehicular prosthesis ferrying him from place to place as if driven or operated by another person: 'I really just walk [...] It's mostly my legs that do the walking,' and again: 'The elevator stops [...] my body gets out and I walk up to our old door.'⁴⁰⁰ Moreover, we see the pathological and the more

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 76/9.

explicitly metafictional collide as Mr C, divested of all sense of self-command, writes: ‘I hear the clatter of the typewriter, it’s right in my ear, and suddenly I’m on my feet again.’⁴⁰¹ His actions seem to bridge at once the prosthetic and the performative, in the sense of his deferred, mediated, or absent, command, and a phraseology that offers some degree of comic irony to the pronouns ‘my’ and ‘I’. This character’s identity is as much deferred, or anonymous, as it is multiple; it is an identity that, alongside its intertextual antecedent, is both familiar and intensely unfamiliar; but, moreover, it is an identity that is attested and rejected, set and deconstructed, not merely in the diegetic realm (i.e., within the fictional world of Mr C), but also in circumstances of its publication, which was condemned by Salinger and was banned in America. This, in itself, might be considered *the* representation of old age we gather from this text, hinging on rejection, disownment, and condemnation.

All of these examples are representationally evasive, and might be argued to bring to the fore questions regarding how to depict organic decay in the context of a society incredulous of the laws of nature, habituated to anti-ageing discourses and ideologies,⁴⁰² and accustomed to ideas of its transcendence. More speculatively, it is the thought of how literary discourse may represent an ostensibly de-chronologized body when and if, medically or cosmetically, we are able have bodies divested of many of the signs of ageing. Fiction, fissured as it is by the impulse to imitate daily life on the one hand and the impulse to transcend it on the other, seems the perfect representation of a culture at once ageing and anti-ageing. The allusions to costume and theatricality, with associated notions of optionality and promises of discontinuance, represent a culture for which ‘the promise [...] is that one might somehow choose not to become old.’⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., p. 233.

⁴⁰² See chapter 5.

⁴⁰³ Biggs, *The Mature Imagination*, p. 47.

ii) Architecture and Domestic Furnishings

*I am nearing forty, nearer the weak
vision thickening to a frosted pain,
nearer the day when I may judge my work
by the bleak modesty of middle age
as a false dawn, fireless and average,
which would be just, because your life bled for
the household truth.*⁴⁰⁴

The relationship between ageing and architecture is summarised in the phrase ‘gerontopia’ coined by Ruth Brent to describe places the elderly inhabit.⁴⁰⁵ The house reflects and disperses an individual’s sense of self, ‘possess[ing] our identities and communicat[ing] messages about our personalities and lifestyles.’⁴⁰⁶ The home is a self-affirming and inherently communicative space, a private space that discloses information about oneself to others. It thus transgresses the boundaries between private and public realms, one’s inner self-image and the objective social image, and is ‘key to remembering one’s life courses and to strengthening the self for continuing independence.’⁴⁰⁷ The house also communicates information about the body:

...the very house in which one dwells is both a reconstruction of the surround world to fit the body and an enlargement of our own physical structure. Its walls form a second

⁴⁰⁴ Derek Walcott, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Baugh (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 49.

⁴⁰⁵ Ruth Brent, ‘Gerontopia: A Place to Grow Old and Die’ in *Aging, Autonomy, and Architecture: Advances in Assisted Living* (USA: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 63.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

protective skin, windows acting as artificial senses, entire rooms, like the bedroom or kitchen, devoted to a single bodily function.⁴⁰⁸

In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard describes the house as a ‘large cradle’ as life begins ‘enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.’⁴⁰⁹ The house, with its familial connections, is also evocative of other visceral spaces, notably the womb in what Bachelard calls the home’s ‘maternal features.’⁴¹⁰ In this section, however, I will be considering natural and architectural spaces, their plethora of objects and domestic furnishings, and their physical conditions, as a topography of the *ageing* body –rather than simply being evocative of *the* body. I shall discuss in this section how writers project, and even equate, the gauche, unruly, and intensely unfamiliar body onto the concrete, geometric spectacle of the house and its milieu of objects. In this, I argue, they offer a clandestine appropriation of the characters’ bodies –their waning sensory acuity, physical efficacy, and specific ailments –through mere description of their physical environment and the minutiae of domestic space. In turn I shall reappropriate Derek Walcott’s phrase ‘household truth’ to mean how architecture offers prognostic signs of and, with all the neutrality and impassivity of the Foucauldian ‘medical gaze,’⁴¹¹ commentates on and imparts clinical truths about the ageing body. I shall discuss how the ersatz bodies forged in the building-body conceit offer a conflicted representation of ageing conflating its pathos and its transcendence, with characters at once embodied and discarnate or incorporal. They externalise the internal, invisible visceral depths, and the changing kinaesthetic and articular impressions of the body and its vicissitudes. However, the anthropomorphising of objects or structures does not in any way evoke or reproduce the holistic body, but instead isolates and magnifies a specific part or

⁴⁰⁸ Leder, *The Absent Body*, p. 34.

⁴⁰⁹ Gaston Bachelard, ‘The House. From cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut’, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 7.

⁴¹⁰ Bachelard, p. 7.

⁴¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), p. 9.

function to the loss or effacement of the whole. This resistance to wholeness is a fitting representation of the sense of diminishment that comes with organic decay, or alternatively is suggestive of how, in pain, the affected body part emerges and becomes alienated from the totality of the body.

In his book *The Past is a Foreign Country*, the historian David Lowenthal argues that:

Things seem biologically aged owing to erosion or accretion. Ageing is a work chair, a wrinkled face, a corroded tin, an ivy-covered or mildewed wall; it is a house with sagging eaves, flaking paint, furnishings faded by time and use. Whatever their historical connections, objects that are weathered, decayed, or bear the marks of long-continued use *look* aged and thus seem to stem from the past.⁴¹²

In a similar vein, John David California describes human ageing in the following terms: 'I guess you could compare getting old to a deserted and run-down house that nobody cares about anymore. A house that people would rather tear down, instead of fixing the creaky old floorboards and the leaky roof.'⁴¹³ Although intended as a pejorative likeness, alluding jointly to physical wastage and social ostracism, the symbolism is also evasive as it juxtaposes the infelicities of age with latent ideas of restoration and the possibility of undoing or disinventing age. In *Ending Up* (1974), Kingsley Amis' depiction of organic decay hinges on a body-building conceit, and the faux organicity he depicts both expresses and repudiates the realities of age. He draws the mechanical *into* the anatomical, the object *into* the subject both to the extension and effacement of the flesh. The synthetic displaces, or plays surrogate to, the ageing body, and contributes toward a teasingly evasive, yet still conventional or canonical, vocabulary of ageing. *Ending Up* is a traditional realist narrative of ageing that becomes covertly and very suggestively transhumanist in its visual lexicon of age –something

⁴¹² David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 125.

⁴¹³ California, pp. 28-9.

captured in the wry defeatism conveyed in the novel's very title. Thematically, there is a very unequivocal engagement with ageing, yet lexically Amis precludes any real engagement with the flesh and therefore with organic decay. He displaces pain, dysfunction, and bodily failure onto the minutiae of domestic space, particularly broken, obsolete objects and furnishings such as 'the egg-eroded teaspoon', the 'unrepairable cookoo clock', the 'leaky ceiling', and the 'bent silver tray'.⁴¹⁴ Any visual idea of age-specific dysfunction is gathered from the terminal disrepair of such objects. As Lowenthal points out, objects convey a clear sense of age, and they do so either physically in erosion through use or neglect, in terms of fashion which connotes an era, or in their reinvention or obsolescence, which also signifies epochally. However, they also remain differentiated from human ageing in the sense that, although they undergo erosion, wear, and become obsolete, they can be restored, remade, or replaced. Thus, such objects connote ageing whilst imbued with the potential or promise of a more symbolic agelessness. The dilapidated cottage in which all Amis' decrepit Beckettian anti-heroes reside in is an extended, prosthetic body. Because the synthetic governs Amis' (apparently salvatory) visual lexicon of ageing, his geriatric characters live in bodies *beyond* bodies, with everything from clothes, furniture, and rooms both recapitulating aspects of their corporeality and 'extend[ing] the self *beyond* the boundaries of the material body [my italics]'.⁴¹⁵

The characters in *Ending Up* share a comic similitude with their surroundings, particularly with the items that festoon the cottage – the 'forlorn mementoes ripped from their context'.⁴¹⁶ When interviewed for 'The Paris Review' by Michael Barber, Amis' response to the remark 'I thought your last novel, *Ending Up*, was very bleak' was:

Yes, well, no book is the author's last word on any subject or expresses what he feels all the time. So if I were to walk under a bus this afternoon, then *Ending Up* would be

⁴¹⁴ Kingsley Amis, *Ending Up* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), pp. 15, 27, 79.

⁴¹⁵ Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), p. 73.

⁴¹⁶ Amis, p. 61.

my last novel, and people might say, “Well, he ended in a fit of pessimism and gloom.” This wouldn’t really be so. Each novel can only represent a single mood, a single way of looking at the world, and one feels bleak from time to time, and takes a fairly pessimistic view of one’s own future and chances. But there are other times when one doesn’t, and out of that other books would emerge.⁴¹⁷

In this novel, one might suggest that Amis is in fact *saving* his characters from the inevitability and pathos of age. Representationally, their physical age is nonexistent as Amis creates a series of architectural uncannies, and does not even allow his character to die from old age, but from accidents associated with the objects that surround them: for instance, George falling off a ladder and Marigold tripping over a ‘damp and considerably lacerated’⁴¹⁸ tennis ball. The objects evade age in the sense they metaphorise it; they even embody mortality in the sense that they are harbingers of death –the characters dying as they come into contact with them. George’s nominal aphasia is metaphorised in the de-historicized artefacts and objects, each of which remains ‘of uncertain period’ or simply ‘vague’⁴¹⁹ and are unidentifiable, anomalous, and collectively indivisible, both in their sheer number and equivalence in dilapidation. In this cottage with ‘too much furniture and too many ornaments,’⁴²⁰ and the few visual ideas for the reader as to the exact appearance of the cottage reflects both the characters’ amnesic episodes and the superficial, dilettantish interest they take in the curios they collectively hoard. Amis also uses functional or mechanical objects to describe and duplicate the body’s movements. This is pronounced in Bernard’s arthritic, painful leg –an image repeated throughout the novel –and its corresponding domestic item of the backward-forward movement of the wrought-iron knocker as ‘the rust or

⁴¹⁷ Kingsley Amis, The Art of Fiction, No. 59, interviews with Michael Barber, *The Paris Review* <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3772/the-art-of-fiction-no-59-kingsley-amis> [accessed 12/10]

⁴¹⁸ Amis, *Ending Up*, p. 85.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77 & 12.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

corrosion impede[s] its movement.’⁴²¹ Likewise, the stiffness and immobility of the largely bedridden George seems subtly played out through the ephemeral, but nevertheless suggestive, mishandling of a journal, too rigid for him to ‘weaken its spine enough to make it lie flat.’⁴²² Other features of the cottage such as doors and doorframes have an almost skeletal quality, and inversely the characters’ skeletal figures seem xyloid in nature. Dysfunctional objects gain a rather heightened significance alongside the characters’ dysfunctional bodies, such as the living room door whose route is impaired by an ill-fitting frame: ‘the door opened suddenly, with a thudding noise because it was considerably warped.’⁴²³ This seems implicit in Amis’ description of Marigold Pyke as ‘very well-preserved,’⁴²⁴ using the language of restoration as if she were a recovered or restored artefact, or even an object indivisible from the tatterdemalion mix of others in the cottage. The body-building conceit, then, feels reminiscent of Lowenthal’s depiction of eroded or broken artefacts as ‘like invalids suffering from some wasting disease.’⁴²⁵

Leder observes in *The Absent Body* how ‘physical experiences such as pain, exhaustion and illness [...] bring about the emergence of the body as explicit object.’⁴²⁶ Amis articulates the ageing process in comparable terms. Descriptions of objects far outweigh those of the body in this novel, and even the altered, defamiliarising sensations and postures associated with or borne out of pain have not an interior, visceral quality, but are ostensibly likened to an embodied, yet foreign and indubitably unruly, prosthesis. He establishes ‘significant points of similarity between older people, decaying material objects and buildings or parts of buildings.’⁴²⁷ These irreducibly varied objects are pseudo-natural extensions of the body, at once recapitulating and constitutively different from aspects of the characters’ bodies. Citing

⁴²¹ Ibid., p. 37.

⁴²² Amis, p. 45.

⁴²³ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 147.

⁴²⁶ Leder, p. 93.

⁴²⁷ Hepworth, p. 80.

Munro (1996), Simon Biggs describes ageing in *The Mature Imagination* a ‘complex process of prosthesis.’⁴²⁸ In *Ending Up* Amis displaces conventional prostheses such as the walking stick for the body itself, and just as the prosthesis is a metonym for yet palliates suffering so too do the characters’ bodies suffer from and cure themselves of age. They are at once plaintive and transcendent figures. However, the prosthetic vision of age may be argued to anticipate, rehearse, or even actualise the prospect of the characters’ death; it might be argued to be a mimesis of decay in the sense that they are broken down, post-bodied, spectral even, and representationally indivisible from their environment –lost within the plethora of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms. Amis’ prosthetic age, then, has the presence/absence dichotomy constitutive of defining the prosthesis, and paints a picture of the characters existing both maladroitly and not at all. It is a highly conflicted portrait of ageing. Amis presents the reader with the notion of the home as an undifferentiated prosthesis, and although the prosthesis does connote disability and ill-health, the sense in which Amis uses it is germane to more contemporary anti-ageing (or even transhumanist) discourses in which ideas of disinventing age predominate. Finally, the theme of prosthetic extension and addition also has its lexical counterpart in this novel, seen in Amis’ heavy emphasis on hyphenated words and phrases –note the recurrence in the following phrase: ‘...second-best trouser-suit, blue-and-green-striped shirt with high long-pointed collar, queen-sized cameo brooch, cigarette-holder.’⁴²⁹ The use of hyphens in compound nouns and verbs is declining and is not as frequent in more contemporary writing –we would, for instance, ordinarily omit the hyphen in ‘visiting-cards’. So, thirty-five years post-publication the preponderance of hyphens in *Ending Up* does not only *age* the syntax in a way hinging on extension and addition, but makes the process of reading and indeed typing it complex and maladroit. Grammatically and syntactically, then, there is some affinity between the book’s

⁴²⁸ Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: The Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 59.

⁴²⁹ Amis, p. 157.

presentation and the sense of inefficacy experienced in the characters themselves, making reader-response both a reflection and prosthetic extension of the characters' suffering.

In 'The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish' from David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Timothy Cavendish is trapped against his will in a labyrinthine, abyssal old people's home, Aurora House. He lives there with other the occupants he describes as '[t]he Undead,'⁴³⁰ and forges escape plans with a militarism that gives this traditional narrative of ageing a comic and disproportional sense of adventure. Unlike the possessive individualism⁴³¹ that characterises the family home, the architecture and furniture of the residential home here suggests a sense of anonymity—a sense of unsparing erasure comparable to those residents with dementia. The clinicality, asceticism, and communality of the environment do not reflect the any single personality but signify only to the collective plight of the patients. In *Aging, Autonomy, and Architecture*, Kaustenbaum writes of this sense of displacement and personal erasure that 'residents are suspended in a floating world that bears little relationship to their previous lives and in which most of their deepest thoughts, feelings, and values are irrelevant.'⁴³² Michel Foucault describes communal spaces that are not social or personal spaces, such as hospitals, prisons and care homes as 'heterotopias of deviation.'⁴³³ He describes these spaces as being occupied by individuals 'whose behaviour is deviant with respect to the mean or required norm.'⁴³⁴ He places the aged in this anomalous, impersonal space, arguing that 'since after all old age is a crisis and also a deviation, seeing that in our society, where leisure activity is the rule, idleness forms a kind of deviation.'⁴³⁵ In 'The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish' the utility and impersonality of the furnishings actually constitute an ersatz homeliness, and constitute the benign familiarity of home and the

⁴³⁰ David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stroughton, 2004), p. 179.

⁴³¹ Brent, p. 70.

⁴³² Kastenbaum, cited by Brent, p. 68.

⁴³³ Michel Foucault, 'Different Spaces' in *Aesthetics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 2, trans. by Robert Hurley et al. (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 180.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*

unsettling unfamiliarity and disconcerting communality of hospital. On being shown to his room, the sense of personal space is lost: ‘my bathroom had been designed for disabled people, it was all rounded edges and fitted with handrails.’⁴³⁶ There is an element of coercion or ventriloquism in the sense that Cavendish unconsciously adopts a dysfunction, as if his body, of its own accord, is colluding malignly with the nature of the environment, conspiring to keep him in residential care: ‘I had acquired a limp but was unsure how. I was lost.’⁴³⁷ It is suggestive of what Glenda Laws describes in terms of ‘complicity between body and environment embodiment and emplacement,’⁴³⁸ but one that is not benign nor affirms one’s sense of self.

Not only is Cavendish forced into the collective anonymity of ‘the Undead of Aurora House,’⁴³⁹ as he terms it, but he continually questions the verisimilitude of those in authority, even pathologizing their ostensible performance: ‘some demented bitch called Noakes is running about the place impersonating a chambermaid. She’s probably riddled with Alzheimer’s.’⁴⁴⁰ Another employee, transformed into a malign, inhuman agent is described as ‘a sexless automaton,’⁴⁴¹ furthering suggestions of inauthenticity and fictitiousness –itself alluding to this text’s suggestive, if dormant, metafictionality. This apparent artifice is emphasised stylistically in the hyperbolic, rhetorical passages relating to the nature of his ostracism, imprisonment, and fatalism of age –all of which Cavendish construes as an obligatory performance:

Behold your future, Cavendish the Younger. You will not apply for membership, but the tribe of the elderly will claim you. Your present will not keep pace with the world’s. This slippage will stretch your skin, sag your skeleton, erode your hair and

⁴³⁶ Mitchell, p. 176.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Glenda Laws, cited by Mike Hepworth in *Stories of Ageing*, p. 78.

⁴³⁹ Mitchell, p. 179.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 177.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p. 183.

memory, make your skin turn opaque so your twitching organs and blue-cheese veins will be semi-visible [...] Language, too, will leave you behind, betraying your tribal affiliations whenever you speak [...] Sooner than you fear, you will stand before a mirror in a care home, look at your body, and think, ET, locked in a ruddy cupboard for a fortnight.⁴⁴²

There is a mock-essentialist treatment of the elderly in this chapter. Mitchell gives human ageing a tragicomic terror, writing: ‘Oh, once you’ve been initiated into the Elderly, the world doesn’t want you back.’⁴⁴³ Other descriptions include: ‘senile boors’ (371), ‘the Kingdom of the Dying’ (371), ‘the Undead’ (374), ‘the zombies’ (389), ‘sentient Undead’ (393), and ‘semi-animate autopsies in mildewed tweeds and colourless blouses’ (382). The manner in which he speaks of the elderly (i.e. as a dysgenic collective) is mimicked by the communality of the hospital environment. There is some suggestion of Cavendish’s ‘initiation’ into this collective in the opening to the second part of ‘The Ghastly Ordeal’ with the lines: ‘Mr Cavendish? Are *we* awake? [my emphasis].’⁴⁴⁴ The plural ‘we’ might be construed both pathological and phenomenal terms: pathological in the sense the patients are amnesic and dehumanised, even, by their intransient physical maladies; and phenomenal in the sense that the clinical, communal, ascetic environment fails to ‘extend’ or reflect them as individuals, designates them collectively as *the sick*. Cavendish describes his ‘cell’ with a sense of both determinate entrapment and a sense of provisionality. For instance, the recurrent descriptions of wipeable surfaces metaphorise the consummate blankness of the amnesic patients in the sense that all vestige of self, of inhabitation, is ultimately erasable: ‘Door, locked from the outside, no keyhole. Window that opened only six inches. Heavy-duty sheets made of egg-carton fibres with plastic undersheet. Armchair, washable seat-cover.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p. 376,

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 369.

Moppable carpet.’⁴⁴⁵ The shining surfaces, or surfaces made explicitly washable, to some extent elude the marks of continued inhabitation and activity. The surfaces seem to aspire not simply to utility, but to erasure –to some form of foreboding eschatological preoccupation with ends that is, paradoxically, revealed in the illusion of perpetual newness. The architecture and furnishings imply absence and, in the fact they are reflective surfaces, abolish some degree of depth, which maps back metaphorically onto the ostensible fictionality of the carers’ roles from the perspective of Cavendish, and the two-dimensionality of his own status as patient.

Although hands play a relatively negligible role in the representation of age, they are nevertheless an important feature in any semiotic analysis of ageing in contemporary literature. Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori* (1966), Marika Cobbald’s *Guppies for Tea* (1993), Pat Barker’s *Another World* (1998), Stanley Middleton’s *Necessary Ends* (1999), Alice Sebold’s *The Almost Moon* (2007), and Julian Barnes’ *Nothing to be Frightened Of* (2009) are all examples of novels (with the exception of the latter, which is a memoir) that place the aged subject on both sides of the divide human/nonhuman. Although the physical environment is not implicated in the representation of senescence, each writer gives the hand a theriomorphic quality, bestowed with a malignant agency and animalistic movements, and as such alienated from the totality of the body and with it any holistic, associationist conceptions of the body. In *Another World*, a novel on memory, loss, and how one’s distant past affects one’s relation to the present, Barker describes Nick observing his grandfather, Geordie: ‘he watches the brown-spotted hand crawl across the counterpane.’⁴⁴⁶ The lack of a possessive pronoun *his* implies self-differentiation, whilst its ostensible sentience and animalistic qualities and macabre self-command dissociate it not simply from Geordie’s body but the *human* body. In *The Almost Moon*, Alice Sebold writes of her mother that ‘*her hands*

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 180.

⁴⁴⁶ Pat Barker, *Another World* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 233

clasped the curved ends of the armrests [...] like involuntary claws [my emphasis].⁴⁴⁷ Despite the possessive pronoun ‘her’, there is a sense of deferred, alien, or perhaps even absent agency as she describes how *her hands* clasped the armrest, not *she* clasped the armrest. This slightly unusual phraseology is also found in Muriel Spark’s novel *Memento Mori* in which she writes: ‘his fingers worked slowly, clutched around the large barrel of his fountain pen. His fingers were good perhaps for another year –if you could call these twisted, knobble-knuckled members good.’⁴⁴⁸ And we also find this, in all its suggestions of self-division, in Marika Cobbald’s *Guppies for Tea*, a novel commentating on the spaces the elderly inhabit, sequestered from the rest of society: ‘his hands, black-bruised and wrinkled, gripped the handles of the sticks at his sides [my emphasis].’⁴⁴⁹ In Stanley Middleton’s *Necessary Ends* – a novel on the banality of a bourgeois retirement and later life –we find, like Sebold and Barker, how the hand is narrated with an eerie self-command, similar to Barker and Sebold: ‘her claw-like hands came from within the blanket [...] brown-spotted, lined, twisted with arthritis.’⁴⁵⁰ All of these examples, I suggest, convey the tactile apprehension of the senescing body, its kinaesthesias and coenesthesias, on the level of grammar. In *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder describes the healthy body as tending towards self-concealment, experiential absence or *awayness*, whilst the ailing body emerges as an explicit object, removed from all tacit self-command, and dissociated from the holistic body.⁴⁵¹ The different phraseologies mentioned above arguably have such medical and phenomenological imputations. Using the example from Sebold’s *The Almost Moon*, the phrase ‘she clasped’ may be regarded as the ‘healthy’ counterpart to the phrase ‘her hands clasped’. In the former, the hand is *implied* in the verb ‘clasped’; representationally, then, the hands are recessive –invisible, if you will. Conversely, the latter phrase, ‘her hands clasped’, renders the hands ostensibly autonomous –implicitly

⁴⁴⁷ Alice Sebold, *The Almost Moon* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 5.

⁴⁴⁸ Muriel Spark, *Memento Mori* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 202.

⁴⁴⁹ Marika Cobbald, *Guppies for Tea* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 97.

⁴⁵⁰ Stanley Middleton, *Necessary Ends* (London: Hutchinson, 1996), p. 49.

⁴⁵¹ Leder, *The Absent Body*, p. 70.

disconnected from the totality of the body in their explicit allusion. The descriptions in these novels are comparable to 19th and 20th century gothic short stories in which the hand's eerie self-command is a reoccurring theme.⁴⁵² In the few contemporary novels on ageing, the hand may not always be represented as explicitly animalistic, yet notions of a detached sense of ownership and agency prevail in these descriptions –notions that buttress Cartesian mind/body oppositions as the senescing body is represented as constitutively alien and separable from one's core sense of self. Drew Leder describes how dysfunction exerts 'a new relation to one's body' which constitutes an '*alien presence*' or 'something foreign to the self.'⁴⁵³ The descriptions in the novels mentioned are a hyperbolic rendering of this, as the hands seem increasingly theriomorphic, or beast-like, in quality, and xyloid in nature, resembling twisted branches. They are described as: 'involuntary claws',⁴⁵⁴ 'claw-like hands',⁴⁵⁵ 'clenched arthritic fingers',⁴⁵⁶ 'thickened Knuckles of old age'⁴⁵⁷ and 'twisted arthritic hands.'⁴⁵⁸ These descriptions have sociological value, particularly with regards to western social ostracism of the economically inactive elderly. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Coming of Age* describes how the elderly are treated as if they 'belong to an entirely different species [...] as *another being*.'⁴⁵⁹ She writes how a culture built upon liturgies of youth 'does not look upon the aged as belonging to one clearly-defined category',⁴⁶⁰ and indeed the novels' fleeting allusions to hybridity might be seen as a gesture towards this crude sense of reclassification, or quite simply a demonstrably pejorative representation of the aged as dehumanised.

⁴⁵² E.g., 19th Century French writer Guy de Maupassant's short stories 'The Hand' and 'The Flayed Hand'; Le Fanu's 'The Narrative of a Ghost of a Hand' (1863); Gérard de Nerval's 'The Enchanted Hand' (1832); Theodore Dreiser's 'The Hand' (1920); William Harvey's *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1928); and Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Brown Hand' (1899).

⁴⁵³ Drew Leder, p. 76.

⁴⁵⁴ Sebold, p. 5.

⁴⁵⁵ Middleton, p. 49.

⁴⁵⁶ Julian Rathbone, *Intimacy* (London: Indigo, 1996), p. 46.

⁴⁵⁷ Barnes, p. 1.

⁴⁵⁸ Spark, p. 75.

⁴⁵⁹ de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 3.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

The semiology of ageing in all the narratives mentioned in this section distorts the corporal form, and plunges the characters into both a sexlessness and a bathetic posthumanity. The very transcendence of the body –its existence across different substrates –seems indicative both of the *erasure* of embodiment and of an aversive, constrictive and unruly sense of embodiment in moments of crisis, pain, or collapse –moments that remind the characters most of the abjectness of their own terminal humanity. Representationally, the body does not exist as a totality, but as a plethora of signifiers that emerge from the text that subtly conjoin architectural and anatomical, synthetic and organic, human and theriomorph, and a palpable sense of pathos embedded in a counterrealism stemming from the very semiology of age.

iii) **Puppetry, Alterity, and Simulacral Youth**

The aforementioned texts stress the ‘sense of continuous inner selfhood through the biologically changing body,’⁴⁶¹ buttressing and at times implicitly parodying Cartesian mind-body dualisms: the metaphysicality of the mind versus the gauche physicality of the body. I have spoken of the prosthesis more in terms of a sensory event –the kinaesthesias and coenesthesias of the senescing body –than a physical adjunct: that is, the sensation of addition or alterity borne from the distinctiveness and foreignness of pain. The texts present the affliction –or even the matter of human ageing as a whole –as something not integral to but extraneous to the body: something that compromises one’s sense of self-sovereignty and the sense of the body’s wholeness, and renders the affected part alienated from the totality of the body which, as a result of this, acts as if under the auspices of a malign, exogenous force rather than through one’s tacit self-command. Yet although the prosthesis is ineffably physical, it also signifies an internal, sensory event, the defamiliarising kinaesthetic and

⁴⁶¹ Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing*, p. 43.

articular impressions of the body, occurring in moments of collapse. The two previous sections of this chapter have discussed the orientation of the prosthesis to the body: that which covers, like the over-garment, and that which extends, disperses, or augments, such as the home. This section on puppets and marionettes considers the prosthesis in more holistic terms, for it deals with the whole body and that which supplants it in its entirety. The puppet is as a simulacrum of the organic, but without the vicissitudes of age: it is, if you like, suspended in time, a symbol of perpetuity –the commodification of immortality in western discourses of consumerism. However, the puppet embodies the loss of self-sovereignty, and ventriloquism is a reasonable metaphor for entropy and the determinism of age. The puppet imagery suggests a stringently materialist evocation of age in this sense, ‘register[ing] time as anything *but* celestial sustenance [my italics].’ In *Remembrance of Things Past* Proust evokes the image of the puppet to describe the experience of time, organic decay, and death:

These were puppets bathed in the immaterial colours of the years, puppets which exteriorized Time, Time which Habit is made invisible and to become visible seeks bodies, which wherever it finds it seizes, to display its magic lantern upon them.⁴⁶²

Although we cannot describe Amis’ characters as puppets, the space of the home almost becomes a repository of objects and structures from which he assembles his ostensibly synthetic, reconstituted bodies that both convey and transcend age. Their bodies constitute a chaotic, ungestalt malformation, with pseudo-natural parts unconnected but juxtaposed in space and vaguely approximating human characteristics and specific physical maladies. Because he rejects any holistic conception of the ageing body (again, fitting to the representation of organic decay), the characters seem like exploded xyloid figures, puppets

⁴⁶² Marcel Proust, cited by Philip M. Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Works of Modernist Fiction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 133.

even –and comparable, perhaps, to Cornelia Parker’s *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) in which fragments of an exploded garden shed are loosely reassembled. In his book *Pinocchio’s Progeny*, Harold B Segal writes that our fascination with puppets is:

...clearly, a projection of the obsession of human beings with their own image, with their own likeness [...] More profoundly, it reveals a yearning to play god, to master life. By constructing replicas of human beings whose movements they can then exert complete power over, artists play at being gods instead of being merely playthings of gods. Inevitably, the impulse to exert domination over the human experience leads to research into the prolongation of life through advances in medicine and technology – the treatment and eventual cure of infectious diseases and the transplantation of organs, human, animal, or mechanical.⁴⁶³

I will be discussing the marionette as a metaphor for ageing in a postmodern consumer society. I will be looking at the ageing body as a deeply conflicted, hyphenated object, bridging youth and old age, finitude and perpetuity, determinism and its overcoming. I want to consider puppetry as a paradigm of western discourses of consumerism and medical progress and the pharmacological, surgical, and biochemical interventions on offer.⁴⁶⁴

Moreover, I want to consider puppet itself as a metaphor both for the underlying *desire* to suppress, or wilfully defer, the ageing process, and of the cosmetic interventions transforming youth from the natural, ordinary state *from which* we stem to the surgical contrivance *to which* we strive –what I shall call *prosthetic youth*. Thus part of my analysis will deal with atemporality, which I shall juxtapose alongside brief discussion on medicalising and aestheticising one’s way out of ageing in a medically progressive and ideologically evasive culture. I use the term ‘prosthetic’ as a hyponym to explore discourses of ageing as well as

⁴⁶³ Harold B. Segal, *Pinocchio’s Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automaton, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 4.

⁴⁶⁴ This discussion is taken up in greater depth in chapter 4.

discourses of youth; I will use it to consider how, in this semantic conflict, the prosthesis emerges as the perfect representation of a culture at once ageing demographically, and anti-ageing commercially and ideologically. In this section, then, the emphasis will be on how the prosthesis works as both a highly materialist representation of age and an evocation of (perpetual) youth, making the prosthesis germane both to gerontological and transhumanist discourses.

In her novel *The Almost Moon*, Alice Sebold explores the pathos of Alzheimer's disease both for sufferer and carer. Spoken from the perspective of the carer, Helen Knightly, the novel depicts her dehumanisation and euthanasic murder of her senescent mother. The narrative is an internal, chiefly non-linear, free-associative monologue starting with the murder and working backward describing Knightly's experience as a carer. Sebold describes the mother's body as an impersonal, quasi-natural assembly of features, using puppet imagery to convey the loss of self-sovereignty, and visioning Knightly not simply as a benevolent carer but as a prosthesis/supplement or, more malignly, as ventriloquist: 'my whole body acting merely as her own hand had once acted.'⁴⁶⁵ Her mother spends the novel's entirety wrapped in towels – a pseudo-epidermis in which she is very loosely contained like a cross between a child and a porcelain doll: an 'open-ended package with her talking head sticking out.'⁴⁶⁶ This infantilisation is not an evasive depiction of ageing, being comparable to retrogenesis (i.e. the childlike dependency and inefficacies in the elderly), yet also repudiates this with counterreal likeness to a porcelain doll, aloof from the vicissitudes of age. Describing the relation of her mother's body to her fathers, she describes how her mother's 'body had folded into his over and over again,'⁴⁶⁷ which is suggestive more of symbiosis than dependence. The disrobing of her mother's body does not expose the abject flesh, but is a process of dehumanization as she

⁴⁶⁵ Sebold, p. 33.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

deteriorates into a succession of puppet-like uncannies: ‘a life-size doll’, a ‘collapsing bag of air,’ ‘cross-hatchings of fine old porcelain,’ ‘an ancient baby doll,’ and ‘silent and broken.’⁴⁶⁸ Helen is implicated into this imagery, also, as she describes handling her as ‘like manipulating a life-size doll,’⁴⁶⁹ and redefining her own identity very much within this conflicted representation of age. The lack of a more ‘natural’ lexicon on describing her mother’s body –that is, its effacement of the flesh –creates an increasingly and counterintuitively abstract image her. After her death, Helen forgoes any description of death, decay, or lifelessness in favour of ‘silent and broken’⁴⁷⁰ like a toy. She both artificialises her mother and infantilises herself in her allusions to playing with, rather than caring for, her mother, and in the evasive, childlike parlance with which she expresses and explores her mother’s mortality. She describes entropy and organic decay in stringently materialist terms: ‘her substance, demolished.’⁴⁷¹ She even has macabre fantasies dividing her body, which are represented not in terms of mutilation but disassembly: ‘I plucked out her eyes, her tongue. While dusting the shelves I multiplied and divided her body parts.’⁴⁷² Her mother is not represented as a totality but an ungestalt assembly of geometric objects juxtaposed in space, and her daughter gradually becomes the malign custodian of her body:

...she ran errands and massaged my feet while they sat begging on a leather ottoman. She’d bring me broths in bed and draw a shawl over my shoulders, rub the caked-on food at the corner of my mouth with a damp cloth. And I would begin to forget her, to scream at her, to say cruel things about her body and her love life and her brain.⁴⁷³

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 9, 10, 14, 32, 58.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴⁷² Ibid., p. 58.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., p. 256.

Her mother's body is also linked explicitly to an android that has acquired sentience: 'merely a robot that had gone off the rails and that, after serving its master faithful for years, had turned back predictably to the place where it was made.'⁴⁷⁴ However, her daughter, towards the novel's conclusion, also conceives of her body as synthetic:

I stared down at my knees, which suddenly seemed as marbelized as my mother's skin. I saw my joints, fat sheared off at a rendering plant. Scarsdale patties made of my thighs and arms and stored in a meat freezer, waiting to be broiled or pan seared.⁴⁷⁵

She describes her viscera in a similar way, as a unruly plethora of 'bags of all kinds, holding my fluids, giving and receiving, an in/out system of effluvia, shit and urine.'⁴⁷⁶ She employs similar metaphors and similes to describe her own body as when describing her mother's, and as such offers a sense of inevitability or glum fatalism in an image that becomes a semiotic echo of her mother. She is thus transformed from carer/ventriloquist to puppet, not dispensing but subject to the hegemony of external control. Retrospectively, this perhaps brings to the fore the image of Helen dragging, manipulating, and pulling her mother's body through the house. I suggested that Helen's body was a prosthetic addition to her own; but in the sense that Helen's own aged body is represented by her as being *apart from* rather than *apart of* herself, and as the second half of the book effectively repeats the images and allusions of the first, I suggest that these early scenes be reconsidered as Helen struggling not with her mother's but with her *own* body. One might consider there being not *two* people, Helen and her mother, present, but *one person* in this scene, with the presence of two people simply a literalisation of the perceived discontinuity between body and self. I evoke again

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 271.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 205.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 251.

Hawthorne's description of looking at a younger image of himself: 'I was really a little startled at recognising myself so *apart* from myself [my emphasis].'

Although the marionette arguably metaphorises the loss of self-sovereignty, it also signifies an always averted death. Under the west's discourses of consumerism, or their reification in prolongevity medicine and bio-gerontological research,⁴⁷⁷ the ageing body is endlessly manipulable, sculptural, and generationally ambiguous as the 'postmodern adult [becomes] really an indeterminately young and possibly ageless person.'⁴⁷⁸ The ageing body is a site of terminal constructedness on which pejorative or evasive ideas over ageing –existing under the auspices of medical progress –are inscribed. Simon Biggs comments that the attention is 'towards surface manifestations of identity rather than its deeper structuration.'⁴⁷⁹ Like a puppet, the ageing body becomes a performing object, subservient to the hegemony of external forces –'consumer culture [which] supplies the props and the environment, allowing the construction of an eternal present with no centre, origin, or destination.'⁴⁸⁰ The puppet might be viewed as the exemplar of the 'postmodern' body. The ageing body is an indefinite series of prostheses: cosmetic surgery, for instance 'assume[s] the makeability of the human body, expanding the limits of how the body may be restyled, reshaped and rebuilt.'⁴⁸¹ Kathy Davis moves on to describe how 'the body is no longer simply a dysfunctional object requiring medical intervention, but a commodity –not unlike "a car, a refrigerator, a house – which can be continuously upgraded and modified"' (Finkelstein 1991).⁴⁸² The ability to aestheticise and medicalise one's way out of ageing through pharmacological and cosmetic interventions, or in the more dilettantish realm of bourgeois consumer culture, all signify youth's endless reiteration, and enable the construction of a body *outside of time*. In this

⁴⁷⁷ See chapter 5.

⁴⁷⁸ Biggs, *The Mature Imagination*, p. 64.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴⁸¹ Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 17.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*

context, I argue F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Curious Case of Benjamin Button' and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* might be construed as proto-postmodern texts of ageing. 'Benjamin Button' is a short story constructed around the conceit of ungrowth. It might be argued to parody the conflation of age categories in the Victorian novel and the representation of 'wise old children who are unable to grow old as they uncannily embrace both youth and old age as their unchanging "essence."' ⁴⁸³ Button may personify the theory of retrogenesis in gerontological discourses, and thus may constitute a relatively traditional realist narrative of age. However, the short story might be argued to reveal a dialogue between literature (or popular culture more generally) and medical epistemology in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century – a 'literary enhancement' or 'conscious' allegory of Progeria. ⁴⁸⁴ From medical specificity to cultural generality, what I shall argue is that Progeria ⁴⁸⁵ in this text might be construed as a metaphor for anti-ageing and the conflicted expectations about the ageing process that individuals have in the context of a culture habituated to notions of reversing age and expectant of their reification. Fitzgerald describes Benjamin as 'baby of threescore years and ten.' ⁴⁸⁶ His descriptions of Button certainly seem germane to anti-ageing discourses and ideologies:

Was the network of wrinkles on his face becoming less pronounced? Was his skin healthier and firmer, with even a touch of ruddy winter colour? [...] He knew that he no longer stooped and that his physical condition had improved. ⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸³ Heike Hartung, Roberta Maierhofer (eds.), *Narratives of Life: Mediating Age* (USA & London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), pp. 7-8.

⁴⁸⁴ W.J. Maloney, 'Hutchinson-Gilford Progeria Syndrome: Its Presentation in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Short Story 'The Curious Case of Benjamin Button' and Its Oral Manifestations' in *Journal of Dental Research*, October 2009, vol. 88., p. 873.

⁴⁸⁵ Progeria: a congenital abnormality discovered in 1886, characterized by premature and rapid aging. The affected individual appears in childhood as an aged person.

⁴⁸⁶ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button and Six Other Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), p. 4

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

There is also a pronounced emphasis on performativity as Benjamin, geriatric in appearance yet infantile in years, is forced by his father to act as a child:

One day he [Benjamin's father] brought home a rattle and, giving it to Benjamin, insisted in no uncertain terms that he should 'play with it,' whereupon the old man took it with a weary expression and could be heard jingling it obediently at intervals throughout the day.⁴⁸⁸

It is not merely his willing self-infantilisation and 'grotesque simulation of filial respect'⁴⁸⁹ which is akin to performance, but his appearance as his father attempts to make Benjamin look younger: 'he might cut off that long and awful beard, dye the white hair brown, and thus manage to conceal the worst.'⁴⁹⁰ However, he moves onto describe how these changes cannot conceal the abjection beneath: 'his clothes did not conceal this, nor did the clipping and dying of his eyebrows disguise the fact that the eyes underneath were faded and watery and tired.'⁴⁹¹

Although the text reflects the medical episteme of the early twentieth-century, there are aspects to the story that conspicuously mythologise Button. One interesting aspect of this short story is not simply Benjamin's ungrowth, but how the matter of that ungrowth surreptitiously redefines those around him. The sheer impossibility of his birth –being 'five feet eight inches tall'⁴⁹² –combined with the few references to his mother, mythologises the circumstances of his birth. Moreover, Benjamin is a continual threat to his father's identity. Roger Button might be perceived to suffer a comparable ungrowth, transformed from paterfamilias to offspring. Chronologically, Benjamin is his father's son, but aesthetically, is

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

his father's father –a dramatisation of what is now referred to as a 'generational blur'⁴⁹³ where aestheticising or medicalising oneself young occasions a flagrant destabilisation of age categories. Whilst Benjamin himself is simultaneously young and senescent, then, his father is also at once the younger and elder as his relation to Benjamin is at once filial and paternal. However, in the middle of the short story there is established a pseudo-fraternal relationship between Benjamin and his father: 'his son was more and more companionable –in fact, since Benjamin had ceased to dye his hair [...] they appeared about the same age, and could have passed for brothers.'⁴⁹⁴ Similarly, towards the end of the narrative, the identities of Benjamin, who is growing younger, and *his* son Roscoe, who is growing older, are initially equated and subsequently inverted: they 'were, in fact, often mistaken for each other,' and later the adolescent Roscoe asks of his father: 'you'd better call me "Uncle" *all* the time, so you'll get used to it.'⁴⁹⁵ A similarly displaced or reconfigured age identity befalls Benjamin's wife also. Growing younger, both psychologically and physiologically, Benjamin becomes progressively repulsed by his wife, revealing his own pejorative attitudes toward old age: '[s]he was a woman of forty now, with a faint skirmish line of gray hairs in her head. The sight depressed him.'⁴⁹⁶ His wife becomes more of a maternal figure, just as his son does a paternal figure, and the rapidity with which his wife ages due to Benjamin's ungrowth becomes as ostensibly unnatural as Benjamin's septuagenarian infancy. One might postulate that no character in 'Benjamin Button' has a definitive age, and that 'age' is not bound up in chronological age or physical characteristics but the role one assumes over another.

It is a paradox in this short story that, being born senescent and growing young, it is *youth* that comes to signify organic decay and death, whilst his descriptions of youth and infancy

⁴⁹³ Toni M. Calasanti & Kathleen F. Slevin, *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging* (California: AltaMira Press, 2001), p. 53.

⁴⁹⁴ Fitzgerald, p. 14.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 21 & 23.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18 -9.

simply allegorise retrogenesis and the loss of self-sufficiency, efficacy, memory and personal recollections with age and senility. Youth becomes a signifier of old age here, in much the same way that, in bourgeois consumer culture and prolongevity medicine, aspects more associated with youth supplant, and indeed themselves *become*, the conventional or canonical signs of ageing. ‘Benjamin Button’ is a text that seemingly plays on this semiotic transition. As Benjamin grows younger he is met with greater disapproval, mistrust, and social ostracism, and, on studying his image and realising that he is growing younger, youth is connected to an ineffable and paradoxical fatalism: ‘He shuddered. His destiny seemed to him awful, incredible.’⁴⁹⁷ He describes how in his encroaching youth he has ‘grown so slight and frail,’⁴⁹⁸ and towards the end depicts a sense of diminishment and ostracism that can only be described as abject youth:

In 1920 Roscoe Button’s first child was born. During the attendant festivities, however, no one thought it ‘the thing’ to mention the little grubby boy, apparently about ten years of age who played around the house with lead soldiers and a miniature circus, was the new baby’s own grandfather.⁴⁹⁹

Fitzgerald retains allusions to ageing and senility in his representation of youth, particularly in the sense that Button is still succeeded by his son, Roscoe, and of course in the fact Button does die a much diminished, insentient, and inefficacious figure. Because of the abject infantilization of Button (which is suggestive more of retrogenesis than it is actual youth), he *ages* youth in an inversely deterministic way.

The technologies of ageing used in the cinematic adaptation of ‘Benjamin Button’ (2008) have great sociological, gerontological, and metaphorical value. Simon Biggs, as I have

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

already mentioned, couples ageing with postmodernity, arguing that consumerism ‘has led to “a blurring of what appeared previously to be relatively clearly marked stages and the experiences and characteristic behaviour which were associated with those stages.”’⁵⁰⁰ The result is a fluid and liminal age identity as attitudes towards ageing, accompanied by the western ‘anti-ageing’ credo, ‘problematis[e] fixed age stages and their tacit basis in social expectation’⁵⁰¹ –something ‘Benjamin Button’ could be said to allegorise. Biggs highlights the notion of youth as a cultural contrivance, a mask or prosthesis which covers or disguises the abject matter beneath. Yet fitting to the conflicted figure of the young/old Benjamin Button, we find that the same metaphor of the prosthesis or prosthetic layer is used when depicting old age, and thus what is suggested in this semiotic echo is the adequation of youth and old age. Brad Pitt, who plays the role of Benjamin Button in the cinematic adaptation, acts under layers of prostheses. This invokes, and indeed literalises, the journalistic, literary, and sociological accounts of ageing discussed in this chapter, such as J.B. Priestley’s depiction of organic involution as an emergent performance, subsisting not through the body but *under* a plethora of pseudo-natural additions and acting as if under the hegemony of some malign exogenous force. In ‘Building the Curious Faces of Benjamin Button,’ Laura Sydell alludes to the synthetic and digital prostheses ‘that are used to make the face of Button: “[t]o make *Benjamin Button*, special effects experts needed to put the head of an aged-looking Pitt on a child’s body for the first third of the movie. The results look just like Pitt — only it isn’t.’⁵⁰² Superimposing the image of the senescing man onto a much younger body, whilst intensely disturbing and even macabre, does not counterpose the realities of age in contemporary culture, neither does it sociological and gerontological discourses, or even the semiotics of age in the narratives discussed in this chapter. It is instead germane to such

⁵⁰⁰ Simon Biggs, ‘The “Blurring” of the Lifecourse: Narrative, Memory, and the Question of Authenticity’, *Journal of Ageing and Identity*, vol. 4, No. 4, 1999, p. 210.

⁵⁰¹ Biggs, *The Mature Imagination*, p. 210.

⁵⁰² Laura Sydell, ‘Building the Curious Faces of Benjamin Button’, *National Public Radio* <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100668766> [accessed 01/2011]

discourses and the cohabitation of youth and age in the antagonism between subjective self-image and objective body-image. For instance, a prevailing image in social gerontology is the mask, of the 'objective truth of age [that] seems fallacious: one has the impression of having put on a borrowed mask.'⁵⁰³ Contemporary consumer discourses and prolongevity medicine, as I shall discuss in chapter five, work surreptitiously on the adequation of youth and age; and likewise, the image of the prosthesis in narratives of ageing conjoin age and the possibility or promise of its undoing. The filmic adaptation of 'Benjamin Button', then, yields an image that, quite inclusively, exemplifies contemporary discourses of ageing. In Sydell's account notions of embodiment and alterity, presence and absence, youth and senescence, organic and synthetic, are juxtaposed. We have a plethora of identities and ages as Pitt's expressions are 'digitally mapped, then recreated and imposed over the faces of other actors.'⁵⁰⁴ Both textually and cinematographically, then, masquerade is important in conveying age identities. As Biggs writes:

A focus on masquerade implies a division of the self into hidden and manifest parts. Further, if one only sees the performance of a masque, this begs a fundamental and controversial question: is there an authentic self beneath these surface appearances?⁵⁰⁵

The digitalization of Pitt's face in 'Benjamin Button', as well as the superimposition of his head on a child's body, dramatizes the dynamics of the mature identity, fissured as it is between the subjective self-image and its continuity versus the objective body-image and its vicissitudes. The technologies of ageing used to make the film, then, are to some extent a paradigm of this dualism underpinning both a great deal of social gerontology and the semiotics of age in some contemporary narratives of ageing. Moreover, inasmuch as Pitt's expressions and movements are a conflation of his own, a child's, and those of the 'special

⁵⁰³ Simon de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 294.

⁵⁰⁴ Laura Sydell

⁵⁰⁵ Biggs, p. 210.

effects' directors, notions of dispersed agency, a loss of self-sovereignty, and the puppet/ventriloquist dynamic are endemic to the performance. This provides an important metaphorical overlap with the themes of ageing, the loss of tacit self-command, and the putative sense of dispossession and alterity associated with the distinctiveness, aversiveness, and constrictiveness of senescence.

Extending the theme of masquerade, Oscar Wilde's jointly Faustian and Narcissan fantasy, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is a text where paradoxes and doubles reverberate. This novel is germane to contemporary discourses of anti-ageing and the fight to prevent all predations of the self. Ageing in a postmodern consumer society is depicted in terms of an 'indefinite postponement' of age, and embodies a laissez-faire individualism where one recoils from or refutes the universality of human ageing for the promise 'that ageing can be effectively abolished.'⁵⁰⁶ Dorian Gray studies and falls in love with his specular double, in particular its changelessness, uttering the fatal words: "'How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young [...] Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!'"⁵⁰⁷ In the text we have two Dorians: the seductive perdurance of his virtual, mimetic image which he comes to embody, and the portrait which ages grotesquely and clandestinely. Wilde confers visibility and, ostensibly, *life* on Dorian's sin, and his 'age' exists seemingly as a malign presence –a second person even –that comes to destroy the ageless Dorian. One may reappropriate *Dorian Gray* as a 21st century parable on anti-ageing and the fundamentally fissured identities it occasions between the 'surface allure and concealed decay.'⁵⁰⁸

There are indeed many parallels that can be drawn between the period in which the novel was written and our own discourses of ageing. For instance, the *fin de siècle* in which *Dorian*

⁵⁰⁶ Biggs, *The Mature Imagination*, pp. 61 & 60

⁵⁰⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 34.

⁵⁰⁸ Mulvey (1991), cited by Biggs in *The Mature Imagination*, p. 74 [accessed 11/12/11].

Gray was written, combined with the Decadent ideologies the novel espouses, offer some affinity with a more contemporary incredulity toward ageing. Although being a transformational movement, the *fin de siècle* is not necessarily engaged only in the ‘new’, but preoccupied with, and always antagonised by, the ‘*fin*’ and its associations with finitude, obsolescence, and decline –as indeed the very *noun* ‘decadence’ suggests.⁵⁰⁹ The Decadent *movement* is often characterised by its opposition and aesthetic indifference to nature: the artificial, opulent, and cosmetic takes precedence over the organic, primitive, and fecund, deviating from that which is considered natural or indeed normal.⁵¹⁰ It is bound up in unnatural practices, the cultivation of drugs, and the renouncing of nineteenth-century naturalism, positivism, philistine bourgeois values of morality and utility, and the practical concerns of ordinary existence –in essence, conditions that counterpose subjects such as ageing and decay. Yet the noun ‘decadence’ is defined as the act or process of falling into an inferior condition or state; deterioration; retrogression; and decay. With its joint allusions to decay and the high artifice that *precludes* decay, Decadence might be construed as useful paradigm of a contemporary society that at once rejects or recoils from Nature and is burdened increasingly by it –in other words, a culture at once *ageing*, as a result of rising life expectancies, and *eluding age* through pharmacological, cosmetic, and medical interventions. Contemporary society is marked by a ‘denial of age, an effort to erase or efface age and to put on youth;’ yet the illusion of a perpetual present towards which the consumer strives –and may achieve –is but a ‘creation of artifice.’⁵¹¹ Anti-ageing renounces Nature in the sense it reveals deep incredulity towards age and mortality; yet ironically, the result of anti-ageing practices –which I discuss at length in chapter five –is an ageing populous that becomes dependent to far greater degrees on medical, pharmacological, and cosmetic interventions

⁵⁰⁹ Clyde D. Le Ryals, ‘Towards a Definition of *Decadent* as Applied to British Literature of the Nineteenth Century’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 17, No. 1 Sept., 1958 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/428013> [accessed 01/11], pp. 85-6.

⁵¹⁰ M.H Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th edition. (USA: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1981), p. 3.

⁵¹¹ Biggs, *The Mature Imagination*, pp. 76 & 72.

than ever before as life expectancies rise. In other words, anti-ageing culture is inextricably and paradoxically an *ageing* one: its healthcare services are stretched further to sustain the ageing population anti-ageing culture at once creates and transcends, whilst the anti-ageing parlance, ideologies, and practices continue to belie the reality they create.

The portrait in *Dorian Gray* exemplifies this paradox: on the one hand, the novel represents the ideal of unchanging beauty which recoils from the fecundity and vicissitudes of instinctual, organic life; but on the other, it represents an unchanging beauty that is haunted, defined and eventually destroyed by corruption, depravity, and decay. The painting represents an ideal but is also the exemplar of human mortality and mortal sin that comes jointly to destroy and define that ideal. Wilde's cautionary tale is about the intractable passage of time on the one hand and its complete transcendence on the other. It valorises artificiality and opulence, surface over depth, rejecting naturalism whilst at the same time exhibiting an acute anxiety toward ageing and mortality, giving back the naturalism Decadent writers putatively reject:

For there is such a little time that your youth will last –such a little time. The common hill-flowers will wither, but they blossom again [...] But we never get back our youth. The pulse of joy that beats in us at twenty, becomes sluggish. Our limbs fail, our senses rot. We degenerate into hideous puppets.⁵¹²

Senescence is represented as a grotesque, caricatural self-parody, with conflicting allusions to the pathos but also the performativity and artifice of age. The terms in which old age is often narrated are often hyperbolic, with the determinism old age represents taking on a highly pathologised, Gothicised, and even demonised form: 'Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken

⁵¹² Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 30-1.

and deformed [...] He would become dreadful, hideous and uncouth.⁵¹³ Ironically, Wilde's depiction of mortality (like Samuel Beckett's depictions⁵¹⁴) here seems to have little to do with biological processes, and is more unnatural, supernatural, a thing of penance, and a malign external force –or even, for Dorian at least, something one does *to* oneself. Furthermore, the representation of age as the incarnation of sin transforms the universality of ageing, for Dorian, into a persecutorial, paranoiac, and highly tormentful individualised state –as if it is just Dorian alone who, as punishment for sin, must suffer it. Senescence is represented, then, as both natural and artificial, with the regaining of one's youth at once intensely, and disturbingly unnatural, even sacrilegious, but also the exemplar of nature as he compares the desire 'to get back one's youth'⁵¹⁵ to that of the flower's transient but recurring fecundity. In Dorian's fissured existence, Wilde probes the boundaries between youth and old age, transient embodiment and perdurant virtuality, 'the normal and the pathological, the child and the adult, the animal and the human, even the living and the dead.'⁵¹⁶ Dorian's Faustian exchange of body for portraiture is foreshadowed in passages prior to its happening. For example, there is very early on in the narrative a subtle collapse of Dorian into portrait as Basil, at once artist and surgeon, says: "well as soon as *you* are dry *you* shall be varnished and framed, and sent home [my emphasis]."⁵¹⁷ Wilde offers a tropological infinity in the adequation of artistic and surgical imagery, flesh and canvas –the vicissitudes of the body and the continuity of portraiture. The painter Basil Hallward sublimates his desire for Dorian in his portrait of him, whilst Dorian in turn becomes immortalised and devastated by this self-image. The novel conjoins the libidinal fear of mortality and the narcissistic love of one's image, and oscillates between opulence, irreality, aesthetic detachment, an opposition to

⁵¹³ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵¹⁴ See chapter 2.

⁵¹⁵ Wilde, p. 51.

⁵¹⁶ Jenny Bourne Taylor, 'Psychology at the fin de siècle' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 17.

⁵¹⁷ Wilde, p. 36.

Nature and organic life, and a palpable sense of determinism associated more with the realism and naturalism Decadent writers purportedly elide. The portrait represents an almost sacrilegious re-creation or ‘makeability of the human body,’⁵¹⁸ and the object-cathexis where the ageing body is an unruly object awaiting restoration or replacement. In her chapter ‘The “Art of Cosmetic Surgery’, Susanne Frazer aligns surgeon and artist, coupling the pre-surgical body and blank canvass, describing ‘the natural body as raw material or “clay”, which the “artist surgeon” can mould.’⁵¹⁹ This is implied in the suggestively medical lexicon Wilde employs –art being described with the positivism associated with medical epistemology, vivisection, experimentalism, and impious acts of creation. He describes how ‘to a large extent the lad [Dorian] was his [Basil’s] own creation,’⁵²⁰ and also ‘a feeling of almost scientific interest’⁵²¹ as the portrait begins to alter. The portrait is described often in physiological terms as it is transformed from ageless to aged, from aesthetic idolatry to medical inquiry: ‘What was that loathsome red dew that gleamed, wet and glistening, on one of the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood?’⁵²²

The soul’s ‘physiognomic extroversion’⁵²³ represents a demythologisation of the central story line, conveying the metaphysical realm of soul and mind in much more palpable, materialist terms. One might argue this has its counterpart in technologies of ageing such as cosmetic surgery, as one can re-sculpt the body to match one’s subjective self-image –and hence, like in *Dorian Gray*, collapsing the boundaries between appearance and subjectivity, or external and internal.⁵²⁴ Dorian has a desire for a seamless public appearance bearing no indicators of

⁵¹⁸ Davis, pp. 28-9.

⁵¹⁹ Susanne Frazer, ‘The “Art” of Cosmetic Surgery: Medicine, Metaphor and Meaning’, *Cosmetic Surgery, Gender and Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 134.

⁵²⁰ Wilde, p. 60.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁵²³ Christopher Craft, ‘Come See About Me: Enchantment of the Double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *Representations*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 109-136 (p. 115)

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2005.91.1.109> [accessed 03/12]

⁵²⁴ Wilde, p. 129.

diet, class status, or age. Moreover, the actual portrait and the connection between one's appearance and one's subjectivity, although profoundly negative in this novel, still convey an ideal with respect to socio-medical discourses: the desire to match one's objective body image to one's subjective self-image. Dorian simply chooses not to age, and has some affinity with anti-ageing and the laissez-faire individualism inherent in it where one recoils from or renounces the universality of human ageing for 'the promise [...] that one might somehow choose not to become old.'⁵²⁵ Dorian becomes his own specular mimesis, and the relation is comparable to Foucault's work on the heterotopia of the mirror where:

In the mirror I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a kind of shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to look at myself there where I am absent –a mirror utopia [...] Due to the mirror I discover myself absent at the place where I am [...] utterly unreal –since, to be perceived, it is obliged to go by way of that virtual point which is over there.⁵²⁶

Dorian does not simply transcend age by selling his soul so that he might, like the portrait, be unchanging; he transcends age in the fact that Wilde confers visibility on Dorian's sin, imbuing the painting, ostensibly, with life and thus making Dorian's 'age' quite literally separable from him. His age is something that he hides or conceals, and this process of concealing is comparable to the cosmetic surface versus the concealed abject matter beneath that for Biggs constitutes postmodern ageing.

⁵²⁵ Biggs, *The Mature Imagination*, p. 47.

⁵²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Foucault*, p. 179.

iv) Conclusion: Ageing and its Semiological Transcendence

This chapter has discussed the prosthetic vision of age as a sort of semiotic flux: in other words, how writers confer aspects of senescence onto inorganic objects and structures that surround the body, and how those objects and structures, in turn, recapitulate in ever expanding circles aspects of one's corporeality in an extended, prosthetic body. Central to this chapter has been the representational paradoxes inherent in this. The prosthetic vision of age positions age in a representationally and interpretatively versatile narrative form that fosters disparate and mutually contradictory images of ageing. The semiologies of age in the literature discussed in this chapter relieves the characters from the infelicities of age yet give some indication of the foreignness of pain and the aversiveness of the body *in* pain. Each piece of literature discussed contains the traditional or canonical indices of decline, whilst simultaneously using them to offer tentatively transcendentalist representations hinging on a sense, or possibility, of agelessness and the eschewal, potentially, of death itself. I have discussed 'age' or 'ageing' as a signified with a constantly deferred and dispersed signifier or ever multiplying set of *signifiers*. In the prosthetic vision, the body is atomised, spread out in an abundance of signs, from over-garments, to buildings, to furnishings, and so on, and offering a visual lexicon of ageing in which the body is endlessly dispersed, perpetually deferred, and ostensibly unnatural. I have argued that the 'prosthetic vision', in its tacit rejection of the totality of the body and the individual's holistic cosmos, expresses the pathos of old age. It literalises the sense of foreignness, alterity, and ungestalt deformity and fracture that comes with the defamiliarising kinaesthetic and articular impressions of the body, with the defamiliarising postures pain and dysfunction compel one to take, and the inaction and inertia they may force one into. The proliferation of the 'signs' or signifiers of age seem at times like a mimesis of decay, ceaselessly dividing and subdividing the body between a plethora of allusions, metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, juxtapositions and

permutations, exemplifying how ‘[in] death, you break up: the bits that were you / Start speeding away from each other for ever.’⁵²⁷ However, I have also argued that the selfsame imagery counterposes the realities of ageing, and may be thought of as covertly trans- or even post-humanist in its representation of bodies beyond bodies –bodies that extend spectrally (signifying or suggesting death) or posthumanly (signifying its transcendence) out *beyond* the prophylactic containment of the body. I have argued that immortality inheres within the very semiologies of age, and that, to continue to prosthesis imagery, it is the very writing, as Derrida says in *Of Grammatology*, that is the ‘sensible matter and artificial exteriority: a “clothing” [...] even a garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask’⁵²⁸ under which and within which the ageing characters find their seductive but perhaps delusive reprieve from time and the vicissitudes of age. I have discussed the prosthesis, then, as a semiotic paradigm –as denoting a conflicted manner of representing age that places the characters on *both sides* of the divide aged/ageless. These characters, I have argued, are fissured: biologically they age, but semiotically they are *ageless*. Such ambivalence, I have suggested, might be argued to be representative of a society at once beset with rising life expectancies and demographic change, yet incredulous of mortality and the laws of nature and habituated to ideas of their transcendence. The prosthetic vision provides an image of the west’s adroit repression of age –its prejudicial or gerontophobic attitudes –as well as offering a new paradigm of hope. Although the senescing characters discussed suffer from a disturbing cartography of physical maladies, the semiology of ageing, and in particular the constructivist representations of the body, is salvatory: the language of ageing implicitly rescues them from the spectre of death, and most importantly asks two things of the modern reader: not to associate ageing bodies with decline and closeness to death, and equally, not to essentialise the literature of age.

⁵²⁷ Philip Larkin, ‘The Old Fools’ in *Collected Poems*, p. 131.

⁵²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 35.

MIMETIC FORM AND THE EVOCATION OF ALTERITY: SUBJECTIVITY AND LINGUISTIC DYSFUNCTION IN CONTEMPORARY ALZHEIMER'S FICTION

*I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you and know this man,
Yet I am doubtful; for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is and all the skills I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night.*⁵²⁹

In 1901 Alois Alzheimer made clinical notes and observations on the behavioural and cognitive symptoms of Auguste Deter. Following her death and autopsy in 1906 the pathology and clinical symptoms of presenile dementia were first identified, with the term 'Alzheimer's disease' attested from 1911. Contemporaneous with Alzheimer's research and the subsequent surge in clinical interest amongst European physicians were developments in narrative technique in literary Modernism: countertraditional experiments that sought to elucidate the non-linear, free-associational nature of mental and perceptual processes through innovations in imitative form (stream-of-consciousness). The elucidation of mental and neurological processes is a feature that is common both to medicine and literature: medicine, through autopsy and developments in perceptual mediations such as the X-ray; and literature, whereby a comparable exhumation of the innermost geographies of the thinking, conscious mind is undertaken through mimetic fallacy (or the theory that form should be dictated by the nature of its subject matter). In this chapter I shall analyse how literary erudition and developments in imitative form in contemporary 'subjective'⁵³⁰ Alzheimer's fiction can

⁵²⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R.A. Foakes (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2005), 4.7, 63-8, p. 355.

⁵³⁰ In contrast to objectively-narrated Alzheimer's fiction (i.e. from the lucid gaze of the carer, and 'objective' in the sense that Alzheimer's is not being narrated from the perspective of the sufferer but from that of the non-sufferer). Objective Alzheimer's narratives/memoirs include literature such as John Bayley's memoir, *Iris: A*

provide insight into the nature and experience of Alzheimer's disease from the perspective of the sufferer. I shall view such narratives as a second, more consciously 'medical' phase of literary modernism seeking the same penetrative knowledge of the brain through imitative form as contemporary medicine through perceptual technologies such as the MRI. This analogy, likening language and literary form to the penetrative seeing offered by perceptual technologies is described by Rita Charon in *Narrative Medicine*. Here she describes narrative as 'like a prosthetic device or a tool with which to get to the truth, like a crowbar or a periscope,'⁵³¹ and others as 'an object or means of inquiry.'⁵³²

The chapter starts from the premise that literary form has a diagnostic potential and that its development and refining should not be viewed as a self-reflexive, exclusivist technical exercise but as a part of a continuing medical imperative to gain further insight into the nature of Alzheimer's disease. Each novel that I shall mention in this chapter attempts to use narrative to 'access' and elucidate what it must be like to experience Alzheimer's, and draw conspicuously on the fictionality of the novel to represent the reality of the disease. In her essay 'On Being Ill' (1930) Virginia Woolf describes the body as 'a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks,' and moves on to describe the experience of ill-health in the following terms:

The creature within can only gaze through the pane –smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant; it must go through the whole unending procession of changes, heat and cold,

Memoir of Iris Murdoch (1998), Linda Grant's *Remind me Who I am, Again* (1998), Alice Sebold's *The Almost Moon* (2007), Andrea Gillies' *Keeper* (2009), Jonathan Franzen's essay "My Father's Brain".

⁵³¹ Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 6.

⁵³² Valarie Raoul et al., 'Making sense of Disease, Disability, and Trauma: Normative and Disruptive Stories' in *Unfitting Stories: Narrative Approaches to Disease, Disability, and Trauma* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), p. 3.

comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness, until there comes the inevitable catastrophe.⁵³³

The salient characteristics of Alzheimer's disease include memory loss, disorientation of time and place, decreased judgement, difficulty with spatial relations and coordination, visual disturbances, and behavioural and cognitive changes.⁵³⁴ Many scholars have written about dementia as a continuous and irreversible attack on first-person subjectivity. Andrea Fontana and Ronald W. Smith have described Alzheimer's disease in the following terms:

The self has slowly unravelled and "unbecome" a self, but the caregivers take the role of the other and assume that there is a person behind the largely unwitting presentation of self of the victims, albeit in reality there is less and less, until where once there was a unique individual there is but emptiness. Witnessing, as the "other," the "unbecoming" of self, creates a feeling of emptiness in the caregivers' hearts. Thus, they act as agents for the victim and impute to him or her the last remnants of self.⁵³⁵

However, when studying the literature of forgetting it is important to delineate natural from pathological forgetting. '[T]here is no need to provide a didactic definition of the word "forget,"' argues Harald Weinrich; 'Man is by nature a forgetful being.'⁵³⁶ Forgetting is endemic to Man, yet the necessity and pathology of forgetting are two very different aspects of this blankness that can be thought of respectively as preservative and destructive. In his

⁵³³ Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill' in *Collected Essays*, vol. 4 (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), p. 193

⁵³⁴ Prem P. Gogia & Nirek Rastogi, 'Symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease' in *Clinical Alzheimer Rehabilitation* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, LLC, 2009), pp. 65-83 (pp. 68-73).

⁵³⁵ Andrea Fontana and Ronald W. Smith, 'Alzheimer's Disease Victims: The "Unbecoming" of Self and the Normalization of Competence' in *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 35-46 (p. 45), University of California Press <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1389006> [accessed 12/01/12].

⁵³⁶ Harald Weinrich, *Lethé: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, trans. by Steven Rendall (London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 1.

epistemological fable 'Funes, the Memorious' Jorge Louis Borges highlights both the grandeur and abjectness of a continuous, uninterrupted recollection of events:

In fact, Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree of every wood, but also every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it. He decided to reduce each of his past days to some seventy thousand memories, which would then be defined by means of ciphers.⁵³⁷

This unbroken, insomnious recollection of what becomes his 'intolerably precise world'⁵³⁸ is, paradoxically, represented by Borges as the *antithesis of wholeness*. The message –and paradox –of this fable is that having a continuous, unsuppressed, and nonlatent recollection of events without intermission will not provide a coherent knowledge of the world, but the consummate incompleteness and moments of absence that comes with forgetting, will. In *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke describes an existential and ontological dimension to memory, where memory becomes a repository for the self which is self-affirming when one draws upon it, as well as enslaving, with the threat of existential death in moments of blankness:

in this alone consists *personal identity*, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that same *person*; it is the same *self* now it was then; and 'tis by the same *self* with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Funes the Memorious', *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates et al. (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 93.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵³⁹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Roger Woolhouse (London & New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 302.

However, Borges represents memory not as a salvatory but necrotic force –one that destroys rather than revives one’s identity. Without natural, diurnal forgetting, Funes is more cognizant of the ageing process and ephemeral grounds on which physical identity rests: ‘[h]is own face in the mirror, his own hands, surprised him every time he saw them [...] Funes could continuously discern the tranquil advances of corruption, of decay, of fatigue. He could note the progress of death, of dampness.’⁵⁴⁰ Funes does not have the abbreviated experience of time gained through forgetting or sleep, and as such memory is inhumane, causing an acute, interminable awareness of mortality and physical decay. On the other hand, forgetting is associated with more of an anosognosic blindness to the vicissitudes of age –to each minute change in one’s appearance –and thus, to some extent, generates an illusion of ‘sameness’ or continuity in physical appearance over time. Funes’ failure to forget, to ‘turn [his] mind from the world,’⁵⁴¹ represents an impasse, an inability to understand any more than the surfeit of details that are presented to him at any given moment: ‘I suspect [...] that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, most immediate in their presence.’⁵⁴² The necessity of forgetting is outlined by David Shenk: ‘[w]hat makes details hazy also enables us to prioritize information and retain patterns. The brain eliminates trees in order to make sense of, and remember, the forests. Forgetting is a hidden virtue.’⁵⁴³ Likewise, Stefan Merrill Block comments in his debut novel *The Story of Forgetting* (2008), ‘that our success as a species is based as much, if not more, on our ability to forget than on our ability to remember.’⁵⁴⁴ Block allegorizes the necessity of forgetfulness in the story of Isidora, in which this fictitious land’s peace is determined by the residents’ collective amnesia, and its descent into war, the introduction of memory. The importance of forgetting is also expounded

⁵⁴⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Funes the Memorious’ in *Labyrinths*, p. 94.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ David Shenk, *The Forgetting: Alzheimer’s, Portrait of an Epidemic* (Anchor Books, 2003), p. 60.

⁵⁴⁴ Stefan Merrill Block, *The Story of Forgetting* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 81.

in Samantha Harvey's *The Wilderness* (2009), in which she writes: 'One cannot be expected to remember everything, and in fact remembering everything is a hindrance to living; if an event comes as a thousand details the brain needs to forget nine hundred of them in order to derive any meaning from that event.'⁵⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche writes in *Genealogy of Morality* of how forgetting has an important function and is not simply a *vis inertiae*:

To shut the doors and windows of consciousness for a while; not to be bothered by the noise and battle with which our underworld of serviceable organs work with and against each other; a little peace, a little *tabula rasa* of consciousness to make room for something new, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for ruling, predicting, predetermining [...] –that, as I said, is the benefit of active forgetfulness, like a doorkeeper or guardian of mental order, rest and etiquette: from which we can immediately see how there could be no happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride, *immediacy*.⁵⁴⁶

Pathological forgetting is an 'existential syndrome.'⁵⁴⁷ The salient characteristics of Alzheimer's disease include: memory loss; disorientation of time/place; decreased judgement; difficulty with spatial relations and coordination; visual disturbances; changes in mood, behaviour and basic personality; and decline in abstract thinking and reasoning.⁵⁴⁸ It is broadly conceived of in terms of retrogenesis, meaning that the individual 'begins to lose abilities in cognition, coordination, behaviour, language, and feeding, in the reverse order that

⁵⁴⁵ Samantha Harvey, *The Wilderness* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 43.

⁵⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Second Essay: "Guilt", "Bad Conscience", and Related Matters' *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 35.

⁵⁴⁷ Jonathan Lethem, Introduction to *The Vintage Book of Amnesia: An Anthology of Writing on the Subject of Memory Loss* (USA: Vintage, 2000), p. xiii.

⁵⁴⁸ Prem P. Gogia & Nirek Rastogi, *Clinical Alzheimer Rehabilitation*, pp. 68-73.

they were acquired in the early years of life.⁵⁴⁹ I open with a quotation from William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606) because the play is evocative of the role of literature in medicine and medical education that I wish to pursue in this chapter. It is remarked that 'during the 16th Century some of the best descriptions of senile dementia were to be found not in medical texts but in literary works.'⁵⁵⁰ This chapter will examine the extent to which this remains the case with fiction today, and how medical practitioners might solicit subjective Alzheimer's fiction in order to gain further, more empathic insights into the nature of the disease. I also want to examine how the interpretative processes of the literary scholar become more medically-attuned, and defined by a more clinical rationality and impassivity than creative, interpretative deviations. For example, with regards to *King Lear* recent scholarship has revealed a more diagnostic response to the play: from studying the verbal evidence within the text, 'King Lear has been diagnosed,' writes Andrea Gillies, 'with vascular dementia.'⁵⁵¹ As a 'Shakespearean examination of early Alzheimer's disease,'⁵⁵² Shakespeare's dramaturgy represents a space where illness and disease are localised –where the very soliloquies themselves harbour a diagnostic potential or diagnostic clues. One important aspect to this play is in the 'medical gaze'⁵⁵³ it elicits and the diagnostic limitations by which interpretation is informed/enformed and domesticated. As I shall move on to examine with contemporary Alzheimer's fiction, literature that becomes fundamentally etiological in nature prompts a clinical attitude to textual analysis –where, as Gillies points out, to interpret is also to diagnose. Concomitantly, it curtails the creative, interpretative liberties and deviations of the reader by implicitly establishing a medical discourse by which interpretation of the text is guided, and offering diagnostic limitations and possibilities within which interpretation should take place. The play's construction around Alzheimer's, I argue,

⁵⁴⁹ Dr Harold D. Foster, *What Really Causes Alzheimer's Disease* (Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2004), p. 3.

⁵⁵⁰ Nawab Qizilbash, *Evidence-Based Dementia Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell Science Ltd., 2003), p. 206

⁵⁵¹ Andrea Gillies, *Keeper: Living With Nancy: A Journey into Alzheimer's* (UK: Short Books, 2009), p. 75.

⁵⁵² Jay L. Halio, *The Tragedy of King Lear* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 61.

⁵⁵³ Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), p. 9.

represents a form of over-determination as medical positivism encroaches on literary hermeneutics –with both the narrative itself and the interpretative process of the reader subjugated to the aetiology and teleology of Alzheimer’s disease.

The texts I shall analyse in this chapter all use literary devices in different ways to convey the sense of obtrusive inseparability from the dementing mind. One of the main objectives of this chapter is to look at literary experimentalism as less of an elitist, florid, arcane, and densely self-referential gesture, and more in terms of how it illuminates the experience of Alzheimer’s as well as the potential value it has as a medical and gerontological resource. Some studies have tended to focus in an elitist way on the one-way traffic model where medicine has had an impact on literary topic and expression. Cynthia J. Davis’ book *Bodily and Narrative Forms: The Influence of Medicine on American Literature, 1845-1915* is one such example of this. At the core of her research is how ‘attempts to grapple with [...] diverse medical understandings through narrative means were not restricted to narrative content alone but necessarily involved formal features.’⁵⁵⁴ Whilst this chapter involves how medical epistemologies elicit innovations in imitative form in fiction, one central consideration is how medical understanding of Alzheimer’s, as a disease or site of therapy, can be significantly influenced using the insights that *literature* can provide. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins asks of the palliative function of literature –of whether ‘a personal narrative about illness, intended for an audience of listeners or readers, serve[s] as a way to “treat” illness.’⁵⁵⁵ The importance of literary hermeneutics in medicine and medical practice is examined by Rita Charon’s *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (2006) and Viv Martin’s *Developing a Narrative Approach to Healthcare Research* (2011), in which it is argued that: ‘by illustrating

⁵⁵⁴ Cynthia J. Davis, *Bodily and Narrative Forms: The Influence of Medicine on American Literature, 1845-1915* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 1.

⁵⁵⁵ Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, ‘Writing About Illness: Therapy? Or Testimony?’, *Unfitting Stories*, p. 114.

and giving insight into illness experience, they contribute ‘narrative’ knowledge which can enhance the practice of ethical and effective healthcare.’⁵⁵⁶

The texts I shall analyse include: B.S Johnson’s *House Mother Normal* (1971), Paul Auster’s *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006), Stefan Merrill Block’s novel *The Story of Forgetting* (2008), Lisa Genova’s *Still Alice* (2009), and Samantha Harvey’s *The Wilderness*. Each text attempts to portray Alzheimer’s from the perspective of the patient. These novels, to different degrees, are constructed around an imitative rather than commentative use of narrative voice. Johnson’s narrative polemics, as I shall examine, represent an explicit conversion of language, syntax, and typography into textual symptoms, transforming reader-response from the interpretative in the ‘literary’ sense to the diagnostic in the medical sense. Part of my analysis into this concerns how the characters’ amnesic states give rise to existential moments of self-inquiry and self-diagnosis, and how this is embroiled in a metafictional commentary on the novel’s own narrative and linguistic condition. I shall address how the author abandons the rational, impassive, mediating control of a heterodiegetic narrator, and draws self-consciously upon their own power to suspend, distort, or reinvent the ‘real’ in order to achieve these ostensibly ‘subjective’ portrayals. Thus the metafictionality of these novels correlates to the profoundly alienating, often hallucinogenic reality the sufferer is confronted with, and this converting of ‘fictionalism [into] a kind of realism’⁵⁵⁷ –the reality of a disease –is fundamental to sustaining the illusion of an unmediated account of Alzheimer’s disease from the eyes of the sufferer. It is an obvious paradox within some of these narratives that they appropriate a modernistic stream-of-consciousness narrative technique to examine the experience of a disease that irretrievably damages first-person subjectivity. I will study the ways in which these novelists textualise illness, and the circumscribed, diagnostic response it

⁵⁵⁶ Viv Martin, *Developing a Narrative Approach to Healthcare Research* (Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing Ltd., 2011), p. x.

⁵⁵⁷ George Graham, *The Disordered Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind and Mental Illness* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 231

evokes in the reader. These narratives represent a growing body of work seeking a more reciprocal relation between the positivist epistemology of medicine and the creative, interpretative potentialities of literature –in particular placing the self-reflexivity of literary experimentalism within the remit of medicine. Recent research has already revealed how grammar and syntax can involuntarily harbour diagnostic clues. Peter Garrard, of University College London’s Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, has studied the deterioration of the longhand and prose style of Iris Murdoch, remarking:

Iris Murdoch was known to write only in longhand, with few revisions of passages, sending the completed longhand manuscripts to her publishers with little allowance for editorial interference. Her manuscripts thus offer a unique opportunity to explore the effects of the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease.⁵⁵⁸

What this chapter analyses are the ways in which this can be achieved *intentionally*. I will study the ways in which medicine and literature illuminate each other, and whether in the context of rising life expectancies and attendant increases in age-related disease, the reading of such literature constitutes a form of social agency. I will study what sort of textual/representational criteria that currently exist in first-person narratives, and from here determine how far it is possible to establish a ‘model’ of Alzheimer’s disease in literature. Such narratives ask whether it is possible to ‘see into the minds’⁵⁵⁹ and the bodies of the afflicted, bringing together narratology and teratology, and converting interpretation into diagnosis, reader into ‘narrative practitioner.’⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁸ Peter Garrard, ‘Iris Murdoch’s last novel reveals first signs of Alzheimer’s disease’ (Feb. 2006), *UCL Media Relations* <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/media/library/murdoch> [accessed 09/11/11].

⁵⁵⁹ B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal: A Geriatric Comedy* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1986), p. 5.

⁵⁶⁰ James P. Meza & Daniel S. Passerman, *Integrating Narrative Medicine and Evidence-Based Medicine: The Everyday Social Practice of Healing* (London: Radcliffe Publishing Ltd., 2011), p. 8.

i) **Ars Moriendi: The Abyss and Salvation of Mimetic Form**

The role of literary hermeneutics in attempting to ‘access’ or gain insight into the experience of Alzheimer’s has become a more prominent preoccupation over the last couple of decades – necessitated, perhaps, by the increase of age-related pathologies with rising life expectancies.

Elizabeth Herskovits comments how:

Alzheimer’s discourse has also produced a troubling dilemma regarding the subjectivity of the diagnosed person. The problem of debased personhood is implicit in the current Alzheimer’s construct, due to its vividly disturbing metaphors and images of AD as “the funeral without end,” “the loss of self,” and “the death before death” (Conen and Eisdorfer). With the popularization Alzheimer’s, the subjective experience of aging and of “senility” have become increasingly horrific and monstrous; we are all afraid of losing our minds as we grow old. In response to the “loss of self” assumed to accompany the disease, we now see a burgeoning literature representing and debating the nature of subjectivity in Alzheimer’s.⁵⁶¹

The role of literature in medical practice is often referred to as ‘narrative medicine’, which Rita Charon defines as ‘a clinical practice informed by the theory and practice of reading, writing, telling, and receiving of stories.’⁵⁶² In terms of narrating Alzheimer’s in literature, and in particular the teleology of the disease, there is an affinity between language as viewed poststructurally, with its complexity, irreducible polysemy, and densities in connotation – a meaning, or signified, that is always a product of ‘infinite reference’⁵⁶³ and passing words or signifiers, and thus is perpetually shifting and unstable – and reality as viewed through the

⁵⁶¹ Elizabeth Herskovits, ‘Struggling over Subjectivity: Debates about the “Self” and Alzheimer’s Disease’ in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 9, No. 2, Cultural Contexts of Aging and Health (Jun., 1995), pp. 146-164 (p. 148) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/649114> [accessed 03/12]

⁵⁶² Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, p. viii.

⁵⁶³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 36.

eyes of the Alzheimer's sufferer. David Keck describes the first-person Alzheimer's narrative as 'deconstruction incarnate,'⁵⁶⁴ because a deconstructive approach to language emphasises the instability and dubiety of meaning, dethrones or desacralises the monistic presence of the Author, and results in 'a systematic exemption of meaning' and a refusal 'to assign a "secret," an ultimate meaning to the text.'⁵⁶⁵ To represent Alzheimer's subjectively, Keck argues, narratives must break down:

A first-person narrative about the effects of the disease would have to become literally unreadable as the person passed into severe dementia. A third-person narrative could still be grammatically readable, but to do justice to the disease, it would have to be so confused and disorientating as to be practically unreadable. Certainly, it should bring us very little pleasure to wander through its maze of words. We should not be surprised that we would have narrative troubles with Alzheimer's disease.⁵⁶⁶

This is exemplified in B.S. Johnson's *House Mother Normal*. The text espouses a 'sick' or 'symptomatic' aesthetic formalism, with each monologue prefaced by a list of pathologies, and the ensuing narratives constructed mimetically around those pathologies. Each narrative represents a topography of the characters' perceptual and somatic states – 'a diagram of certain aspects of the inside of [the] skull,'⁵⁶⁷ as Johnson terms. The list of pathologies prefacing each monologue represent narrative determinants as changes in syntax, punctuation, grammar, and typography correspond to the pathologies listed in each preface: dementia, haemorrhoids, short-sightedness, and so on. Through this conversion of bodily symptoms into textual symptoms, Johnson makes pain – a sensation invisible to others and thus bereft of much representational content – an objectified, materialised, textualised, and

⁵⁶⁴ David Keck, 'Deconstruction Incarnate: The Etiology and Teleology of Alzheimer's Disease' in *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 28.

⁵⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author' in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd edn., ed. by David H. Richter (USA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), p. 877.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁶⁷ Johnson, *House Mother Normal*, p. 204.

above all localisable phenomenon, a textual artefact. The list of pathologies prefacing each monologue is as much a diagnosis of the narrator as it is the narrative. The abstract, arcane, necrotic, and increasingly complex nature of each monologue, whilst profoundly alienating, represents a somewhat inevitable oscillation between the lists of symptoms prefacing each monologue. Johnson has a perverse fascination with the annihilating power of physical and psychic pain, and implicates the reader in this –their confusion and alienation paradigmatic of the speaker’s own aversive or constrictive psychic, perceptual, or somatic states.

Alternatively, it forces the reader to adopt a more impassive, positivist, diagnostic gaze, correlating textual symptoms with the physical symptoms we know them to have.

The intentions of his multi-perspectival narrative are made clear from the introduction by House Mother who, addressing the reader, comments: ‘you shall see into the minds of our eight old friends, and you shall see into my mind. You shall follow our Social Evening through nine different minds!’⁵⁶⁸ The nine monologues are simply transcriptions of the same event spoken by each resident, each in varying degrees of senility –and with each monologue, therefore, delivered in varying degrees of lucidity. The repetition across the narratives is unifying, implying both the communality of this scene and the objectivity of their surroundings. But this is deceptive. The more severe the speaker’s physical or mental pathology, the more ungrammatical and unrecognisable the narrative. Each monologue works toward a jointly mental, physiological, and representational sense of affliction, with each textual symptom mapping on to the different pathologies we are alerted to in each monologue’s preface. In this Johnson is not only asking ‘*is* or *can* language and narrative be “sick”’, but rather: to what extent can there be a stylistic equivalent of different illnesses – schizophrenia, for instance, dementia, or arthritis. Johnson does go some way toward demonstrating there can be: semi-consciousness and forgetting are represented in ellipses,

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

sentence fragments, blank spaces, and sometimes whole blank pages if the character falls asleep. For characters suffering from advanced dementia the prose breaks up and all we get are nonsensical words, non sequitur dialogic fragments, and letters thrown arbitrarily across the page as Johnson tries to recreate what might be going on in these minds. Yet he occasionally tunes into more specific physical complaints. He employs a very crude use of typography in Ron Lamson's monologue, for example, using a different typeface, larger lettering, greater line length and line spacing in the passages where Lamson suffers most acutely from his haemorrhoids. This is also played out on a semantic level as his difficulties in moving are mimicked in highly tautological passages, resulting in a lack of narrative progression for the reader. Likewise, as his pain and immobility increase, the narrative becomes more complex and free-associational, which of course implicates the reader again. As the prose demands several re-readings just to be understood, it engenders a methodological slowness in the reader equivalent to that of the physical tardiness of the sufferer. It is at this point Johnson's duplication of events in other monologues becomes significant. In the case of Lamson's monologue where the reader is required to fill in the spaces, often this must be done with recourse to another, more complete narrative. Not only his slowness, then, but his dependence on the more able-bodied is paralleled in the reader's 'dependence' on the more lucid accounts. Part of Johnson's subjective vision of pain and senility, then, is not only in invoking a medical gaze in the reader through a symptomatic aesthetic, but a response analogous to that of the residents' mentally, or in this case physically, slower engagement with the world. For Johnson, when depicting dysfunction, a lucid, communicable, and grammatically sound narrative is therefore tantamount to a concealment, or repudiation, of its subject matter. In striving for an ever closer approximation of the nihilating effects of time on mind, body, and identity, he is questioning what constitutes representation and also the role one takes when reading. In many ways, the extent

to which the reader's progression through and understanding of the text is *compromised* is itself constitutive of this disclosive act of 'making evident'. The act of reading and interpreting is not just aligned with diagnosis, then, but more unsettlingly to symptom. By extension to this, our clarification of the grammatically unsound or 'sick' narratives is therefore implicitly curative. By seeking a causal relation between the condition of the ageing body or mind and that of the narrative, Johnson exhumes the invisible geography of the body and its innermost sensations, and converts the residents' nonverbal, semi-conscious reception of the world into language and narrative. He does not passively represent the characters' illnesses, enforming and domesticating them through narrative, but offers up a fiction about illness through creating an illness of fiction. It is comparable to Keck's description of a 'true' first-person portrayal:

The disease challenges and relativizes all of our assumptions about language, meaning, and humanity itself. A true first-person, end-stage Alzheimer's narrative –if it were physically possible from someone who cannot speak, type, or hold a pencil – would be the ideal deconstructionist text.⁵⁶⁹

Central to Johnson's aesthetic of disarticulation is ironically the *translatability* of the ageing body and senile mind; he stresses the diagnostic potential of language and form and the extent to which, in subjective age narratives, interpretation *is* diagnosis. Johnson conveys progressive senility through a progressive and insidious experimentality, and it is thus a paradox in his work that the abjectness, pathos, and determinism embodied in senility coexists with the flare, energy, and polemicism of his linguistic and stylistic decisions. In his experimentalism, Johnson's representation of ageing might be said to hinge much more on

⁵⁶⁹ Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 32.

innovation, novelty, artistic energy and flair –might, in a postmodern spin on Pound’s dictum, be said to ‘make it new’ –than with subjects of finality, fixity, and finitude that are perhaps more commonly associated with old age. The narrative structure, syntax, and typography all take their cue from the characters’ experience of organic decay, senility, and the inevitability of death. The text is a morbid text, a site of morbidity; yet the stylistic choices paradoxically lend it an experimentalism and ‘newness’ more associated with the *nouveau roman* than the subject of ageing. Philip Tew comments that Johnson’s narrative ‘conveys a type of immediacy in the sense of direct communication based on actions and eventfulness.’⁵⁷⁰ The stylistic choices conflict with the themes of ageing, organic decay, and determinism; yet in its complexity, its gradual accretion of detail, and its increasingly abstract and free-associational style, the text demands more of the reader. Tew calls this an ‘extended act of making evident by form,’⁵⁷¹ and paradoxically the ensuing *compromise* to the reader’s ability to engage with and understand the text is constitutive of this disclosive act of ‘making evident.’ Tew argues that the ‘collective supersedes the individual’⁵⁷² in this novel as each narrative can only be understood firstly in the context of an overarching sequence of events which is repeated, and secondly in the sense that each narrative is substantiated by the preceding one and anticipates the succeeding one. This interdependence between the narratives is enforced by their dialogic connection: ‘Mrs Bowen, can you pass me your glue, please? This one’s finished’, for instance, is answered forty-four pages later in Sioned Bowen’s narrative ‘Glue? Yes here.’⁵⁷³ Without cross-reference on the reader’s part, the first is rendered a rhetorical question and the second an unsolicited reply. Despite the sequential pagination, the narratives are unfolding simultaneously rather than linearly, and despite their introspective, monologic nature are in reality energetically and exhaustively dialogic with multiple points of connection. The role of

⁵⁷⁰ Philip Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 78.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 84 & 128.

the reader seems at times compensative and perhaps even curative to make the narrative cohere –put more crudely, to ‘fix’ the narrative. The narrative structure effects a methodological ‘dependence’ on the part of the reader on the earlier, more lucid narratives. Modelled on the disintegrating perception brought about by senility and physical maladies, the monologues deteriorate, and as they do so the reader becomes dependent on the early sections of the text –the reader’s fulcrum in a progressively disorganised book, and a dependency mimicking that of the sicker residents on their carer, House Mother.

The narrative also elicits a sense of forgetfulness in the reader. House Mother’s concluding narrative is characterised by eclectic and ostensibly unsolicited comments and responses such as ‘*Charlie, yes, I knew you’d ask. You’ve got corks from the ones which were full, haven’t you?*’, the initial question to which –‘What about corks? Here she comes, down. *What shall I do for corks for these, Miss?*’⁵⁷⁴ –is over one hundred pages earlier in Charlie Edwards’ monologue. Because of the complex and discursive nature of the book, the reader’s own amnesic response and difficulty or slowness is a protraction of that of the residents’ own, ostensibly contagious, psychic and somatic distress. Jonathan Coe writes in his biography of Johnson that: ‘an unaccustomed breadth of human sympathy coexists with –even arises out of –a technical experiment that is as rigorous and audacious as he attempted’ and that Johnson’s ‘technical brilliance is never given precedence over a humane and proper response to the characters’ pitiable situation.’⁵⁷⁵ Both Gloria and Sioned’s monologues are replete with sentence fragments, ellipses, a diverse and inconstant typography, a lack of punctuation, italicised passages, and incomplete dialogues mixed in with an introspective stream-of-consciousness. There is very little description of their environment, which conflicts with the residential feel of the novel as a whole, and seems to signify their waning sense-impressions as they near death. Prefacing these particular patients’ monologues, Johnson reveals a lack of

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 41 & 194.

⁵⁷⁵ Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2005), pp. 24-5.

visual acuity (both of which, we are told, are at 45%). As Philip Tew notes, ‘the old people’s power of recall varies according to their level of senility, with some accounts a random scattering of words and many mixing the particular evening at home with recollections of their own pasts.’⁵⁷⁶ We, like Gloria and Sioned, have a very limited ‘view’ and understanding of their surroundings which have been distorted and ‘blurred through senility,’⁵⁷⁷ and in the narratives’ bridging of the textual and the mental, mediates between ‘sense and nonsense, between reason and unreason, between the readable and the unreadable.’⁵⁷⁸ Consciousness and typography are inextricably bound in Sioned Bowen’s monologue. This is rendered explicit in the page left completely blank, after which follows ‘*Oh! Must have dozed off.*’⁵⁷⁹ Likewise in Gloria Ridge’s monologue, structured around perceptions, digressions, memories, feelings, mental images, and dwindling consciousness, which the narrative approximates:

...me and then	get this down me and
Then I’ll be all right	
Spuds and mashed and	with knees
Try hard	peas, peas, peas
Shovel peas in, more	then I’ll be all right
More?	
	More
General sold his	cockerel

⁵⁷⁶ Tew, p. 44.

⁵⁷⁷ Coe, p. 24.

⁵⁷⁸ Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness*, trans. by Martha Noel Evans et al. (California: Stanford University Press. 2003), p. 5.

⁵⁷⁹ Johnson, p. 123.

The meat is good, more meat, that's

The thing, must eat to get right, get this meat down me and then

I'll be all right, that's it, ask for more meat. *More meat?*⁵⁸⁰

Through various grammatical, typographic, or syntactic 'failures', the reader is led circumspectly into a diagnostic rather than purely hermeneutic relation to the text, with the jointly mental and textual sense of affliction. In this respect, nonsense is disclosive rather than distortive, and the patient's reality, which has little or no representable content (distorted as it is), is simultaneously made representable and communicable through Johnson's use of imitative form. Johnson seemingly renders mimetic fallacy a teratology, using it to examine, exhume, or x-ray, the physical and neurological deficiencies and deformations of his characters/patients. His aesthetic of disarticulation seems to be a self-reflexive technical exercise and an evocation of the machinations of neurological decline, built on both the positivism of the medical gaze and the creative liberties and deviations of the author. It is a book where to refract reality is also to reflect it, and thus Johnson conjoins the pseudo-realities that fiction can offer with the diagnostic certitude that medicine can offer. With recent developments in medical research, the narrative structure, whilst still obviously subjugated to the list of pathologies prefacing the monologues, can also signify differently. The disjointedness and eclecticism, rather than a mimetic portrayal of the patients' disordered or waning perceptual states, may be read not as pathological but as palliative. Although the basis of an anachronistic interpretation, we see that in their paper 'SenseCam: A Retrospective Memory Aid' Steve Hodges et al. outline the use of cameras worn by Alzheimer's sufferers to 'capture a digital record of the wearer's day, by recording a series of

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 96.

images and capturing a log of sensor data.⁵⁸¹ The effect is that patients suffering from amnesia can retrieve portions of their day that they have forgotten from studying the visual images taken every few minutes. The experience of time, then, might be said to have the disjointedness and eclecticism that characterises Johnson's stream-of-consciousness:

Scrape the plate, the mash off, mash off corners

Swinging on

Roles, nothing much on, just something round his

Unmentionables, as we

Used to call them, into all that mucky water and crawlies,

Out in the bare colds or rocks was it,

Only a picture after all.⁵⁸²

The narrative structure –particularly its typographically demented rendering of thought and consciousness –can arguably signify the pathological *or* the curative, in the same way that these stylistic decisions, contrasted with his subject matter, conjoin the pathos of age with the novelty, energy, and flair symbolic more of youth or youthfulness.

Through his use of mimetic form, Johnson asks the reader to consider the differences between an imitative over a commentative style. Similar to stream-of-consciousness, he does not attempt to tidy the vagaries of the (senile) mind, but strives towards linguistic and narrative dysfunction comparable to that condition. Whereas commentary *effects* distance

⁵⁸¹ Steve Hodges et al., 'SenseCam: A Retrospective Memory Aid' in *UbiComp 2006: Ubiquitous Computing*, ed. by Paul Dourish & Adrian Friday (New York & Germany: Springer, 2006), p. 177.

⁵⁸² Johnson, p. 97.

from its subject matter, being always in excess of the signifier, Johnson creates a jointly neurological and representational sense of affliction, eliciting as he does so a reader-response that is both diagnostic and classificatory. He creates a fiction about illness through constructing an illness of fiction, and in the process transforms us from a reader of fiction to the arbitrator of a disease. The strong, imitative stylistic deficiency transforms syntax, typography, and punctuation both into the mediation –the means to gain greater insight into the nature and experience of bodily and mental deficiencies –and the symptom. A lucid, mediating, or formalistic narrative might be argued to deviate representationally from the nature of its subject matter, embodying that which its subject matter *isn't*: lucid and able. By contrast, in admitting specific ailments into language and form, Johnson embraces, stylistically, that which his subject matter *is*: compromised and deficient. He asserts the *translatability* of age-specific pathologies in language and narrative, and uses language to penetrate below the visible area of the body. Through imitative form he offers a representational equal, or equivalent, of the sort of instrumental mediations in modern medicine, such as the stethoscope or x-ray, which allowed physicians to see into and examine previously invisible corporal depths.

House Mother Normal is a text that presents its very narrative aesthetic as a site of morbidity. The text lends itself less to the interpretative deviations and liberties associated with literature and more to the positivism of medicine and clinical observation (or the 'medical gaze'). Charon describes scientific and epidemiological knowledge as the attempt to discover things about the world that are 'universally true,' and by contrast narrative as 'enabl[ing] one individual to understand particular events befalling another individual.'⁵⁸³ For Johnson, however, his text ostensibly obliterates the individual, representing instead the degradative processes and objective truths of a disease. Whilst individuality is expressed in the book's

⁵⁸³ Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, p. 9.

monologic structure, it is abandoned with the prefacing of each monologue with a list of pathologies. The erasure of the individual is fitting, perhaps, to the nature of dementia, and thus this ostensible narrative failure or paradox is transformed instead into the perfect expression. The narrative thus has qualities that, in Charon's estimation, typify the sciences. Before the French Revolution of 1789, clinical work in hospitals involved doctors listening to patients' stories of illness before basing their diagnosis on little more than conjecture. With the Revolution came a change in the organization of French hospitals and an effort to make medicine more rational, less theoretical and more practical and empirical. This brought a rise to prominence of new techniques and technologies, including the stethoscope and, arguably, separated medicine and narrative. Michel Foucault, focusing on this epistemological change, coined the term 'medical gaze' to denote the dehumanizing medical separation of the patient's body from the patient's identity. In many ways contemporary readership has undergone a similar change in narratives such as *House Mother Normal* seeking a subjective portrayal of Alzheimer's disease. In connecting various representational and textual characteristics explicitly with *specific* symptoms, reader-response is grounded much more in diagnostic accuracy than interpretative deviation. For Johnson to admit the condition of senility and decay into literary form is to jeopardise the very nature of that form, for his characters' ailments and deficiencies are the very opposite of form –it is the *loss* of form, the *loss* of identity. As Samantha Harvey commented in an interview about her Alzheimer's narrative, *The Wilderness*, 'how do you build a narrative out of mental collapse? How do you emulate confusion and chaos in an eloquent and sufficiently ordered way?'⁵⁸⁴ This text really symbolises the forceful presence of old age in the literary canon, which is certainly important culturally. Yet in a postmodern spin on Pound's dictum 'make it new' he has presented old age stylistically as a full-bloodedly novel and polemical force in literature. This is not a

⁵⁸⁴ Samantha Harvey, 'Samantha Harvey on *The Wilderness*' *The Man Booker Prizes* <http://www.themanbookerprize.com/perspective/articles/1268> [accessed 28/2/11]

problem in itself, but being in such stark contrast with the themes and issues raised in this text, which include everything from the loss of self-sufficiency to the wish to die, stylistically one might construe this as tantamount to an effacement of the subject matter. In the same way people try to aestheticise, medicalise, and verbalise their way out of old age,⁵⁸⁵ Johnson's text seems to stylise its way out of conventional associations with old age through this neo-modernist imperative to 'make it new'. This text is fissured by its undeniable thematic engagement with old age on the one hand and its powerful stylistic repudiation of it on the other. Might *House Mother Normal*, then, be construed as the perfect representation of a culture at once ageing and anti-ageing?

Paul Auster's novella *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007) espouses similar techniques to Johnson's geriatric comedy, correlating the text's metafictionality and intertextuality with the character's confused, amnesic state and lack of identity. Although Auster's text is not outwardly designated an Alzheimer's narrative, there are many stylistic features that constitute a mimetic reflection of his character's neurologic state. Unlike *House Mother Normal*, Auster nowhere explicitly states what his character, Mr Blank, suffers from, although it is made surmisable, or diagnosable, through some of the text's prevailing features. It might be argued that this is not simply a post-Beckettian text of ageing, but a subjective portrayal of Alzheimer's with specific emphasis on the deleterious effects of the disease on both memory and consequently identity. This novella seems, at times, a contemporary counterpart to *House Mother Normal*. It is a book that does not *disclose* anything, whose very subject matter is ambivalent throughout and is not resolved but distorted further at the book's conclusion. Auster presents us with an insufferably, disorientatingly intertextual novella, a text whose covert rewriting of at least five Beckett novels and countless of his dramatic works, plus much of Auster's own corpus, results in a text with a much dispersed, deferred,

⁵⁸⁵ See both the introduction to the thesis and chapter five.

and arguably absent identity of its own. There is, I argue, a mimetic relation between this text's exhaustive, nihilating exercise in postmodern recyclability, and its antihero, the senescent, amnesic and therefore appropriately named Mr. Blank. This book's failure to disclose and resolve does in this text constitute representation, in much the same way as Johnson's syntactic and typographic irregularities do. The aged Mr. Blank wakes up in a featureless room with no memory of who he is, where he is, or the nature of his confinement. Auster prompts the reader into action asking: 'Who is he? What is he doing here? When did he arrive and how long will he remain?'⁵⁸⁶ Somewhat of an affront to the teleological needs of the reader, this invokes a jointly investigative and diagnostic reader-response as we are required to assemble his identity from the growing repository of covert intertextual references. Although it is a fundamental part of Auster's representation of forgetting, we can use intertextuality toward more curative ends, so to speak. However, of course our very doing so, although suggesting the recuperable nature of the narrative, involves us in the selfsame act as Mr. Blank –who likewise is called upon to figure out, even author, his own identity. To represent Mr. Blank's experience of amnesia, Auster plays self-consciously on and rejects the presumed authorial obligation to disclose. It is an obligation that he delegates to his very character, who is offered a manuscript he believes is about himself, and is told: 'you have the beginning, now I want you to give me the middle and the end.'⁵⁸⁷ Auster not only uses a surfeit of intertextual references as a metaphor for Mr Blank's amnesia and consummate lack of identity, but accredits the character's *condition* to his very fictionality. Auster alludes frequently to the artefactual condition of Mr. Blank, his existence in typeface, and the world around him as a series of artifices, and impermanent structures. As such he symbolically conflates neuropathology, intertextuality, and metafictionality, and through that

⁵⁸⁶ Paul Auster, *Travels in the Scriptorium* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 1.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

intertextuality, using the Anxiety of Influence as a metaphor for memory and the contingent nature of identity.

The novella has an intertextual link with Beckett's minimalist monodrama *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958)⁵⁸⁸ and his trilogy novel *Malone Dies* (1951). Both *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Krapp's Last Tape* are perfunctory, ascetic narrations of the comparably empty, ascetic lives of their characters Krapp and Mr Blank –both names connoting evacuation and emptiness. *Travels in the Scriptorium* opens with an old man sitting in a featureless room, with no answers to the questions as to who he is, where he is, and what the nature of his incarceration is –whether he is hospitalised, imprisoned, or ‘the subject of psychological torture.’⁵⁸⁹ Auster seems to challenge the presumed authorial obligation to reveal and disclose as he renders Mr Blank's situation, like his identity, frustratingly ambiguous. This is paralleled in *Malone Dies*, the second book in Beckett's trilogy, in which Malone, an old man, wakes up in a room whose exact nature remains a matter of assumption and intuition rather than knowledge:

This room seems to be mine. I can find no other explanation to my being left in it [...] It is not a room in a hospital, or in a madhouse, I can feel that [...] And when I look out the window it is clear to me from certain things, that I am not in house of rest in any sense of the word. No, this is just a plain private room apparently, in what appears to be a plain ordinary house. I do not remember how I got here.⁵⁹⁰

For Auster's amnesic and senescing Mr Blank, the only repository of knowledge is a manuscript on the table in his room. The boundaries between reader, character, and author are collapsed as the anti-hero, the aptly named Mr. Blank, begins to read the manuscript he

⁵⁸⁸ *Travels in the Scriptorium* spans only one chapter and Beckett's drama a single act.

⁵⁸⁹ Stephen Poole, ‘Ghost in the Machine’, *The New Statesman* <http://www.newstatesman.com/200610300053> [accessed 21/02/11]

⁵⁹⁰ Samuel Beckett, ‘Malone Dies’, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (London: Calder Publications Ltd., 1994), p. 183.

believes to be an unfinished report about himself, before realising it is fiction and then completing the narrative himself. Within his sparsely furnished room is a camera implanted in the ceiling, ‘the shutter click[ing] silently once every second, producing eighty-six thousand four hundred still photos with each revolution of the earth.’⁵⁹¹ The impassive and alienating ‘surveillance’ vocabulary Auster employs connects this camera with an investigative, perhaps even diagnostic gaze—a gesture, perhaps, to the extradiegetic reader. The white ceiling within which this camera is implanted is likened by Mr. Blank to ‘a sheet of blank paper,’⁵⁹² alluding in jointly metafictional and neurological terms to both this ostensibly deficient narrative and the character’s amnesic state. The noun and adjective ‘blank’ implicitly connects fiction and syndrome, as the one-dimensionality of the anti-hero seems both symptomatic of the Auster’s authorial disobligation to *tell* (as well as, being the introductory point in the novella, the character has yet to be fully established) and of his presumed pathological state, which we are led to assume is Alzheimer’s (although Auster abandons the epithet ‘old man’ for the more temporally ambivalent ‘Mr. Blank’ by the third page). This narrative, then, is about the fictional construction and jointly metafictional and pathological disassembly of the identity of Mr. Blank.

The name ‘Mr. Blank’, combined with its neurological and metafictional undertones, bridges the nominal and the pathological, and notions of presence and absence—the *name* ‘Blank’ being a declaration of presence whilst the *adjective* ‘blank’ is constitutive of absence or emptiness. The name Krapp, too, in its obvious excremental connotations, suggests an assertion and negation, or more crudely, evacuation, of identity. Both the aged Krapp and empty signifier Mr Blank are engaged in acts of self-narration (or self-invention), Krapp through his tape recorder and Mr Blank through studying photographs and reading—and subsequently authoring—a story, or report, that he believes to be about himself. Whilst Mr.

⁵⁹¹ Auster, p. 1.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Blank's identity is reducible to, and dependent upon, various notations (i.e. the written word), Krapp's is his annual, perfunctory utterances (i.e. the spoken word). In *Krapp's Last Tape*, Krapp is depicted listening to a tape he recorded thirty years previously at the age of thirty-nine as he continues in his annual impassive documentation of his life:

Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell, apart from my old weaknesses [...] Celebrated the awful occasion, as in recent years, quietly at the Winehouse. Not a soul. Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separating the grain from the husks. Jotted down a few notes, on the back of an envelope. Good to be back in my den, in my old rags.⁵⁹³

Similar to Mr. Blank's awareness of his fictionality –implied in his reference to his life as 'this story'⁵⁹⁴ –there are allusions to performativity and artifice in Krapp, for instance in his clownish, caricatural demeanour: '*Rusty black narrow trousers too short for him. Rusty black sleeveless waistcoat, four capacious pockets. Heavy silver watch and chain [...] dirty white boots, size ten at least, very narrow and pointed. White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair.*'⁵⁹⁵ Moreover, the texts are replete with references to authorial gaze/control through recording devices within which the characters' lives are contained, and through which they are narrated. These devices are explicit in *Krapp's Last Tape*, as the title suggests, and more voyeuristic and investigative in *Travels in the Scriptorium*:

It should be noted that in addition to the camera a microphone is embedded in one of the walls, and every sound Mr. Blank makes is being reproduced and preserved by a highly sensitive digital tape recorder. The least groan or snuffle, the least cough or

⁵⁹³ Samuel Beckett, 'Krapp's Last Tape' in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber. 2006), p. 217.

⁵⁹⁴ Auster, p. 7.

⁵⁹⁵ Beckett, p. 215.

fleeting flatulence that emerges from his body is therefore an integral part of our account.⁵⁹⁶

These recording devices conjoin the acts of writing/speaking and remembering for these aged characters (inasmuch as they prompt/substantiate their respective identities), and blur the boundaries between the omniscient authorial voice on the one hand and the character's self-authoring on the other. Both characters narrate themselves, Krapp through the tapes he records and Mr. Blank through the report/fiction he writes. However, whilst these correlative acts transform them into authors, the act of *forgetting* transforms them into characters, or even readers, as they both become simply 'the man in the typescript he has been reading'⁵⁹⁷ or listening to.

Tape recorder, pen/paper, and photos all act as a prosthetic memory for the characters.⁵⁹⁸ Despite the fact he is in the throes of decay, for Krapp, the recorder and ledger offer him a non-linear experience of time. Through his cumulative self-documentation, his experience of time is recapitulative as he revisits past entries intended for when there is 'perhaps no place left in my memory.'⁵⁹⁹ Similarly, for the amnesic Mr Blank, the photographs and report/story offer some repository of self-knowledge and, on the revelation that 'it's make-believe [...] A work of fiction,'⁶⁰⁰ a means of self-creation as he decides to complete the story himself: as Samuel Farr says to Mr. Blank of the incomplete manuscript, 'you have the beginning. Now I want you to give me the middle and the end.'⁶⁰¹ For Krapp, the tape recorder aids a similar self-authoring that Eric P. Levy describes as his 'retrospective project [...] not to return to the

⁵⁹⁶ Auster, p. 7.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

⁵⁹⁸ Carla Locatelli, *Beckett at 100: Revolving it All*, ed. by Linda Ben-Zvi et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008), p. 71.

⁵⁹⁹ Beckett, p. 220.

⁶⁰⁰ Auster, p. 70.

⁶⁰¹ Auster, p. 80.

past, but to define his identity through the annual progression of perspectives on the past.⁶⁰²

The texts seem to allegorize the interrelationship of language and identity, playing the finitude and in-built obsolescence of body and (senile) mind off against the linguistic immortalisation of Blank and the phonetic immortalisation of Krapp. Despite both being texts of ageing, then, both narrate themselves out of old age, mortality, and forgetfulness:

It will never end [...] we, the figments of another mind, will outlive the mind that made us, for once we are thrown into the world, we continue to exist forever, and our stories go on being told, even after we are dead [...] Mr. Blank is old, but as long as he remains in the room with the shuttered window and the locked door, he can never die, never disappear, never be anything but the words I am writing on this page.⁶⁰³

This might also be considered the case for Krapp and his recapitulative project: ‘Be again, be again. [Pause.] All that old misery. [Pause.] Once wasn’t enough for you.’⁶⁰⁴ Organic decay, one might suggest, is in direct contrast with language, and this contradiction is what might be seen to characterise both texts. For Krapp, his serial self-memorialisations seems simply to represent an absurd and vacuous servitude to habit, having ‘nothing to talk to but his dying self and nothing to talk to him but his dead one,’⁶⁰⁵ and so may represent some form of imprisonment. Likewise, for Mr. Blank this symbolic linguistic immortality is a kind of punishment, as is implicit in the likeness drawn between the blank ceiling of his cell and a blank piece of paper, with typescript signifying occupation –or as Patricia Waugh describes of language, a ‘prisonhouse from which the possibility of escape is remote.’⁶⁰⁶ Language and narrative –particularly for Auster’s ascetic, deficient novella –is at once pathological and

⁶⁰² Eric P. Levy, ‘*Krapp’s Last Tape* and the Beckettian Mimesis of Regret’ in *Trapped in Thought: A Study of the Beckettian Mentality* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007), p. 184

⁶⁰³ Auster, pp. 129-30.

⁶⁰⁴ Beckett, p. 223.

⁶⁰⁵ Samuel Beckett, *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. by Maurice Harmon (USA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 59

⁶⁰⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 4.

curative, compensating for a lack of identity and ensuring its perpetuity: ‘when is this nonsense going to end? [...] It will never end.’⁶⁰⁷

In *Travels in the Scriptorium* the interrelationship between language and architecture is important in Auster’s exploration of memory. The language of fiction, Mr. Blank’s physical enclosure, and his aphasia might all be considered synonymous. This becomes evident upon the realisation that this novella is highly intertextual. It is this intertextuality that highlights the incompleteness and brevity of this novella, which resonates in a sly fictional self-consciousness with Mr. Blank’s autobiographical incompleteness and endlessly deferred, displaced, or absent sense of identity. As aforementioned, Mr. Blank is given no prehistory in this text, which gives his character a self-consciously fictional one-dimensionality; rather his identity is dispersed: borrowed from other novels within Auster’s *oeuvre* as a personification of an exhaustive postmodern recyclability. It is unclear, in this sense, whether Auster is using ‘the intertextuality, recycling, and self-referentiality of the postmodern form’⁶⁰⁸ from which to explore forgetting, repetition, and the attempts to salvage an identity in amnesic, perhaps senile patients, or whether Mr. Blank is used as the personification of and critique on these aspects of postmodernity. Indeed there is a paradox in all of this in that the suggested overabundance of intertextual identities is played out in *Travels in the Scriptorium* in a blank, empty room –a reoccurring feature in Auster’s *oeuvre* –and within its namesake, Mr. Blank. For instance, Anna Blume, the chief protagonist in *The Country of Last Things* (1987), nurses Mr. Blank in what we assume is either a hospital or residential care home for the elderly, but more importantly has an undisclosed affiliation to him that acts as a source of self-knowledge. Anna Blume was married to David Zimmer, formerly the chief protagonist in *The*

⁶⁰⁷ Auster, p. 129.

⁶⁰⁸ Stuart Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 2nd edn. (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 109.

Book of Illusions (2002), whose death is ‘only indirectly’⁶⁰⁹ linked with the actions Mr. Blank; Fanshawe, the author of the manuscript on the desk in Mr. Blank’s room, was the elusive figure investigated by private detective Quinn in *The New York Trilogy* (published sequentially 1985-6); Sophie, Fanshawe’s widow who looks after Mr. Blank; and Peter Stillman, again a character from the trilogy. Collectively these characters represent a potential repository of knowledge for Mr. Blank whose identity, being dispersed in this way, firstly has no cohesion and secondly is contingent upon the reader’s foreknowledge of these texts. Without knowledge of this intertextual genealogy, just as if one did not have any recollection of one’s autobiographical past, the reader is thrown into the same position as the amnesic Mr. Blank. The existential questions arise, then, if the reader has not read the aforementioned novels inasmuch as the characters within those texts are ultimately custodians of, and offer some intertextual prehistory and authenticity to the identity and existence of Mr. Blank which he otherwise lacks. It seems, then, that despite the people who care for Mr. Blank, *we* as readers become custodians of him as we assemble his identity from these disparate narratives and characters.

Although Mr. Blank’s appropriation of the story of Sigmund Graff (whom we assume could be our anti-hero) carries with it the suggestion he, rather than Paul Auster, is narrating/creating his identity, the intertextuality implicates the reader in the construction of that identity – ‘unwillingly participating in the game Auster himself induces his readers to play,’⁶¹⁰ as Paul Jahshan comments. This schizoid or compensative surfeit of voices is also represented on the level of punctuation. Throughout the novella Auster forgoes speech marks that would help delineate one speaker from another more definitively. When Mr. Blank adopts the narrative of Sigmund Graff, for instance, his monologue is interrupted by Samuel

⁶⁰⁹ Auster, p. 22.

⁶¹⁰ Paul Jahshan, ‘Paul Auster’s Spectres’ *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 37, No. 3 (Dec. 2003), p. 389 <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/stable/27557388> [accessed 21/2/11].

Farr with ‘I’m sorry. I won’t interrupt anymore,’⁶¹¹ with the response ‘Interrupt all you like. We’re involved in a complicated story here.’ Although one assumes this is dialogue, the speakers’ voices are not distinguished through the use of speech marks, and so not only is the presence of Farr in this scene equivocal, but this play between monologue and dialogue might be seen to allude to the many characters that constitute the Mr. Blank. In Auster’s layers of storytelling, we do not know whether this is real or imaginary dialogue, and the text as a whole is replete with such ambivalence on account of this ubiquitous lack of speech marks which may map back on to the dynamics of his identity in this way. Through a use of intertextuality comparable, as Sophie Harrison comments, to literary predecessors such as T.S. Eliot,⁶¹² we are left to assemble the identity of Mr Blank and thus question ‘who the author of these sentences might be’⁶¹³ just as Blank questions who he may be. In this, issues of authorship and memory, metafictionality and neurology are juxtaposed, as Blank’s failure to recall and recollect is bound up with Auster’s characteristic refusal to provide an easy, complete, or cohesive narrative. Mr. Blank’s forgetting and consequent incompleteness as an individual, then, is a nod to the author as well as to the reader who, due to the narrative deficiencies, is embroiled in the same struggles as Blank.

The many disparaging reviews *Travels in the Scriptorium* has received seem to focus primarily on its brevity and ostensible incompleteness. Linda L. Richards comments: ‘Paul Auster’s 13th novel is almost wonderful. One gets the feeling that the author was reaching for something here, something he doesn’t quite attain. Part of the reason for this might be a simple lack of scope.’⁶¹⁴ This novella gestures toward absence, lack, or incompleteness, what

⁶¹¹ Ibid., p. 86.

⁶¹² Sophie Harrison, ‘Sunday Book Review: The Content of his Characters’, *The New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/18/books/review/Harrison-Sophie.html?_r=1 [accessed 21/2/11]

⁶¹³ Auster, p. 5.

⁶¹⁴ Linda L. Richards, ‘Mr. Blank’s Big Day’, *January Magazine* <http://januarymagazine.com/fiction/scriptorium.html> [accessed 21/2/11]

Richards calls: 'a half-cooked casserole; a partially baked idea.'⁶¹⁵ But is this not the point? Like Johnson, part of what Auster seems to allude to is the extent to which, in representing the teleology of dementia –the consummate blankness that comes with forgetting and the ensuing compromise to identity –a narrative *should* disclose, *should* clarify, *should* assert some definitive separation from other texts in the canon. This is not to say, for instance, that subjective narratives of boredom should be boring, but it does, nevertheless, raise the question as to what extent literature must become sick, must fail, in order to represent pathologies of ageing 'subjectively'. The reader may be considered at once patient and practitioner: that is, patient if we are unfamiliar with Auster's *oeuvre* meaning we remain as disorientated as the ailing character, and practitioner if we are familiar with it –as a result of which we can administer greater lucidity to, or rather 'cure', the forgotten identity of Mr. Blank. Auster arguably captures the pathological loss of one's sense of identity through his narrative reticence, and through the breaking both the fictional illusion as well as the illusion of a self-contained textual/authorial identity independent from his predecessors (namely Samuel Beckett). In Mr. Blank, awareness of his presumed neurological condition, his characterisation, and the novella's disconcerting brevity and intertextuality, all seem correlative concerns. Whether neurology or narrative is the subject of diagnosis and speculation, then, remains ambivalent. What I do suggest, therefore, is that, unlike most critics' reception of this book, its brevity, its incompleteness, and failure to reveal anything *does*, like *House Mother Normal*, constitute representation and disclosure.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

ii) Pathological Forgetting and Insidious Fictionalities

In their study of narrative approaches to disease, illness and disability Valarie Raoul et al ask: ‘what difference does it make if the story is framed as truth or fiction?’⁶¹⁶ Lisa Genova’s *Still Alice*, Samantha Harvey’s *The Wilderness*, and Stefan Merrill Block’s *The Story of Forgetting* are novels that draw conspicuously on the fictionality of the novel in portraying the reality of Alzheimer’s disease from the perspective of the sufferer. Their portrayal of Alzheimer’s has not the narrative polemics of Johnson and Auster’s texts. For Auster, I have said that a subjective account is gained through metafictionality, asceticism, a general negligence of detail, postmodern pastiche and a disorientating, nihilating glut of intertextual references; and for Johnson, I have argued that this is gained through explicit conversion of physical/mental symptoms into textual symptoms. Both *House Mother Normal* and *Travels in the Scriptorium* are texts that, through use of mimetic fallacy, are a site of morbidity, and for the reader bring together the realms of narratology and teratology –in other words, the study of narrative equated to the study of disease and deformity. For Harvey, Genova, and Block, their novels are much more controlled, impassive, and vivid, yet this does not mean that they mediate the experience of Alzheimer’s. These novels are built upon a conceptual entanglement between neurological and semiotic realms, and they bring together a rhetorical, nominalist line of enquiry with a vivid, medically-attuned, essentialist, and (from the perspective of the reader) *delimiting* account in their representation of Alzheimer’s and *the reality of alterity*. What I shall be discussing in these three novels is the way in which the authors avail themselves of, and at times exploit very self-consciously, the various narrative techniques and alienation tropes at their disposal in order to represent the disease ‘subjectively’. I shall discuss how moments of sly fictional self-consciousness serve at once to perpetuate a sense of fictional inclusivity *and* convey the objective realities of Alzheimer’s

⁶¹⁶ Multiple Contributors, ‘Making Sense of Disease, Disability, and Trauma’ in *Unfitting Stories*, p. 7.

disease –the rhetorical, imaginative realms of fiction constituted, in other words, with the positivism of medical epistemology. Whilst the two seem initially antipathetic, what the novels do is demonstrate the ways in which the fictionality of the novel correlates with the reality of Alzheimer’s.

The Wilderness is a highly disaffecting, non-linear heterodiegetic narrative following Jacob Jameson –a sixty-five year old architect with Alzheimer’s. The novel returns frequently to the subject of entropy and offers a materialist depiction of Alzheimer’s that brings together the realms of architecture and neurology. In this novel, there is a clear sense of reciprocity and exchange between the rhetorical, hermeneutical examination of Alzheimer’s and the positivism and impassivity underscoring its more objective, medical evocation. Harvey converts rhetorical into etiological discourses, and the language of entropy and the building-brain conceit are what Harvey draws upon to do this, conflating the demolition of buildings with the decay of neural structures. The reader is asked to be cognisant of the neurological references underpinning many of her metaphors as well as of the narrative structure itself, which is disorganised, free-associative, and entropic –mimicking, perhaps, the ‘neuron loss, neurotransmitter loss, [and] the destruction of synapses’⁶¹⁷ that make it difficult for Jacob to recall memories. Like Mr. Blank in *Travels in the Scriptorium* and Krapp in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, we follow Jacob’s retrospective project to piece together the memories from his life – what he describes as a ‘sea of events and names that have been forgotten’ and have ‘no sensible order to them, nor connection between them.’⁶¹⁸ Like *House Mother Normal* this is as much a declaration or diagnosis of Jacob’s condition as the narrative structure. There is little clear or predictable movement between the chapters, and she privileges a fractured, aleatory and non-linear narrative over a logical exposition of thoughts and recollection. The chapters move from: Jacob’s sixty-fifth birthday with him thinking about his son’s

⁶¹⁷ Samantha Harvey, *The Wilderness*, p. 243.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

imprisonment and his wife's death; to the 1960s and his father's funeral, his son being 'only weeks old'⁶¹⁹ at this point and his wife, Helen, alive; to a scene of domestic banality and then into the future as he meditates on Helen's death, the nature of old age and 'the banality of this *land of forgetfulness*;⁶²⁰ to the past and a scene at the zoo with Helen and his son Henry, now a baby; and then forwards as he muses on the fate of a girl named Alice who, it is implied, is his daughter, but whose existence remains ambivalent throughout. Instead of offering a totalising or holistic narrative befitting of its third-person omniscience, she offers a story built on a series of narrative fragments or oclusions and a general accretion of detail so that the novel does not simply depict but exemplifies Jacob's disorientated and amnesic state.

Methodologically, the reader either seeks distinction from or becomes implicated in the narrative structure: on the one hand, reader-response may be compensative, or symbolically curative, in the sense that one might forge or contrive links between narrative fragments; or on the other hand, reader-response may emulate the confusion and consummate blankness of the amnesic protagonist as he attempts to recall moments from his life.

Harvey provides a surfeit of disconnected images, and perhaps the most fitting expression of the abbreviated, non-linear evocation of Jacob's life is in the description: 'all of this he remembers and can see as plain as day –he just can't say when it happened. Like a photograph that cannot be placed anywhere specific in the album.'⁶²¹ Like *House Mother Normal*, the narrative disruption, its fragmentary, free-associative style, and impassive third-person narration, has implied neurological connotations, being comparable to 'his mind tripping from one thing to another.'⁶²² He describes how:

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶²¹ Ibid., p. 66.

⁶²² Ibid., p. 183.

...he pauses, interrogating his brain aggressively for the clarity that sometimes comes out of temporary confusion, but this time it didn't come. After a lifetime of well-founded reliance on things just fixing themselves, he finds it disturbing to accept that they are more likely, now, to stay broken.⁶²³

The alienation tropes in this novel necessitate a comparable difficulty in the reader in engaging with and following the narrative, asking, as Jacob himself does: 'When was this? Which episode of the past? How long has Eleanor been here?'⁶²⁴ This inability to delineate one timeframe or episode from another is comparable to Jacob's failure to recall memories accurately and unequivocally, and on a more fundamental level delineate one *word* from another:

He forces his book into his coat pocket; he notes the name because Hansen sounds like *handsome* and the words intertwine until he can no longer tell them apart, and until the author is imagined as a striking, knowledgeable, middle-aged man despite his photograph that suggests otherwise. Hansen, handsome. Different words, same words.⁶²⁵

The narrative structure, correlated with his misrecollections and disordered perception of time, constitute 'just happenings, a lack of signposts.'⁶²⁶ However, despite this chaotic structure and narrative amnesia, the repetition of several images such as the sound of gun shots, the cherry tree, the love letters, and the human skin bible offer some respite from an otherwise disaffecting and disorientating read. The building—brain conceit is one such consistent feature in the novel and offers some semblance of cohesion. The building—brain conceit emphasises the material, anatomical deterioration of the brain. Jacob describes

⁶²³ Ibid., p. 61.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., p. 226

⁶²⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

architecture as ‘an *external* consciousness [my italics],’⁶²⁷ which is what, in essence, the narrative structure is as Harvey, like Johnson or like stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, converts her character’s neurological processes into a textual artefact. In this narrative, Jacob’s mapping and building of houses (which is his vocation), the assembling memories of episodes from his past to help build, or like Mr. Blank *author*, his own identity, and the reader’s task in contriving links between the narrative fragments, are all correlative tasks. Harvey correlates the realms of the architectural, neurological, and narratological, any or all of which can be construed as the subject matter in Jacob’s meditations on the nature of entropy –of ‘the theory that says everything loses, rather than gains order.’⁶²⁸ He moves on to describe entropy in the following terms:

A house can become a mere pile of bricks of its own accord, but a mere pile of bricks will never become a house of its own accord. Everywhere nature’s fingers unpick as if trying to leave things as they would be if humans never existed.⁶²⁹

Because this encompasses so much in the novel –from its narrative structure, to Jacob’s neural structures, to the attrition of Jacob’s external environment, to its textual counterpart – Harvey gives a sense of universality to Alzheimer’s. Although *The Wilderness* is comprised of an impassive, third-person heterodiegetic narrative voice, there is also, paradoxically, a sense of interiority to it that is given by the broadly mimetic nature of the narrative structure. Thus the extradiegetic feel of the narrative’s third-person omniscience may not necessarily be representative of a mediating authorial control, or even the disaffection and clinical impassivity in the reader gained through the narrative-neurology conceit; rather it may be indicative of Jacob’s sense of alterity or self-removal as Jacob struggles to retrieve his own past. Alzheimer’s is narrated as a malign, arbitrary force, and Jacob describes it as if ‘all my

⁶²⁷ Ibid., p. 234.

⁶²⁸ Ibid., pp. 34-5.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

wires are being unplugged one by one. No, not even in an order, just unplugged'⁶³⁰ –a description that goes some way toward justifying, and hence *rationalising*, the comparable arbitrariness of the narrative's structure.

Perhaps one of the most interesting phrases Harvey coins is 'architectural amnesia,' a phrase in which an explicit comparison is made between Jacob's neural structures and the accretion and eventual demolition of buildings until they 'disappeared as if [they] never existed.'⁶³¹ He remarks earlier in the novel how '[t]here *are* no buildings to see. They are gone. A faint programmed guilt at the shamefulness of what he built, and a mounting amnesia over them (did they ever actually exist?).'⁶³² The physiological and the architectural are also conflated as he describes how '[e]very day I feel –things become thinner [...] The world becomes thinner'⁶³³ –allusions to his senescing body and the demolition, and even ambivalent existence, of his architectural domain evident. Similarly, the geographical and neurological are also juxtaposed as becoming lost in the city functions, ostensibly, as a figurative engagement with Jacob's moments of amnesic self-loss: 'the streets become a jail; he is lost. One street just looks like another, and he finds himself climbing a hill steeper than his legs can manage, so that he sits halfway up catching his breath, striking the poor dog's head and wondering at what point he became an old man.'⁶³⁴ Lisa Genova, too, collapses the categories of inside and outside, physical and mental, through use of the city:

Clustered pedestrian traffic on the sidewalks and intermittent negotiations with car traffic [...] crowds forming and milling around on street corners waiting for walk signals [...] a steady stream of joggers, dogs, and their owners, walkers, Rollerbladers,

⁶³⁰ Ibid., p. 166.

⁶³¹ Ibid., p. 185

⁶³² Ibid., p. 162.

⁶³³ Ibid., p. 162.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., p. 186.

cyclists, and women pushing babies [...] Alice retained only a vague sense for what was going on around her.⁶³⁵

In both of these examples the labyrinthine, ‘meandering streets’ and the characters’ joint failure to navigate through them and subsequent alienation from their environment holds some similarity with the ‘neurofibrillary tangles and the plaques’ which result in neurotransmitter loss and an inability of neurons to communicate with each other.⁶³⁶ Harvey also describes this quite lyrically: ‘His past is just an electric impulse. Static flashes on a petticoat. Gradually he is being scattered and lost –hundreds of unread messages floating out across the sea.’⁶³⁷ Harvey juxtaposes a more lyrical, rhetorical vocabulary with a vivid, incisive neurological parlance, and this provides a generic antipathy between positivist and metaphorical realms –which themselves become paradigmatic of Jacob’s own subsistence between the realms of reality and hallucination as his Alzheimer’s worsens. As Jacob considers the unreliability of memory and his problems delineating reality and actuality, we are invited to consider the ways in which medical versus the metaphorical evocations of Alzheimer’s constitute not so much a reciprocal as antipathetic relation. The linguistic contrast between them maps onto the double reality Jacob experiences as he worsens. The more incisive medical parlance correlates to a clarity and lucidity he loses as he deteriorates, whilst the linguistic processes involved in metaphor offer a sufficient distortion of or distance from its referent to make it comparable to the reality of alterity that Jacob experiences with his Alzheimer’s. He comments of his recollections: ‘Maybe it is not true. And if it is true, maybe the disease will make him forget it before he can be sure of it.’⁶³⁸ This invokes a sense of mistrust and blurring of the fictionality of the novel and his reality with Alzheimer’s: ‘was all of it a dream? Is the dog real? Did he feed her the lamb, and has he *ever* fed her lamb, and

⁶³⁵ Lisa Genova, *Still Alice* (London & New York: Simon & Shuster, 2009), pp. 20-1.

⁶³⁶ Harvey, pp. 242-3.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

has he ever fed her at all?’⁶³⁹ Similarly, the nature of Jacob’s wife’s death, the existence of his daughter, Alice, and the content of the love letters is ambivalent. For instance, as one chapter ends, poignantly and definitively, ‘surely their heads would come back up and their bodies would be swimming. Nothing,’ the next opens: ““Your mother and Rook didn’t drown,” she [Eleanor] says. “Where did you get that idea from?””⁶⁴⁰

Jacob’s deterioration is articulated as an emergent fictionality as he becomes aware that aspects of his life are not ‘memor[ies] at all, but a fabrication,’⁶⁴¹ and at this point the differences between a hermeneutical versus medical examination of Jacob’s Alzheimer’s is forefront. Stefan Merrill Block’s *The Story of Forgetting* hinges on such a linguistic difference, contrasting a medical with a highly allegorical parlance, a didactic versus an explicitly evasive, even puerile, rhetorical examination. The novel is, in the words of the author, about ‘the disease’s persistent march through the generations of [a] family.’⁶⁴² It is comprised of three narratives: Abel, living with his twin brother, Paul who suffers from Alzheimer’s, and Paul’s wife Mae, whom he loves and eventually has a child with, Jamie; Seth Waller, a precocious adolescent who begins ‘empirical investigations’ to uncover the genetic history of his mother’s Alzheimer’s; and finally a fable about Isidora, ‘*a land without memory, where every need is met and every sadness is forgotten.*’⁶⁴³ The novel, in short, includes a fictional account of familial Alzheimer’s, a didactic account constructed as a report, and a highly allegorized portrayal of forgetting in the world of Isidora. The differential narrative modes are important in this novel, as they embody linguistically that which the Alzheimer’s sufferer experiences perceptually (i.e. actual versus hallucinogenic reality). Like *The Wilderness* this novel offers a materialist portrayal of Alzheimer’s disease, focussing on

⁶³⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 216-7.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., p. 87.

⁶⁴² Stefan Merrill Block, ‘On the Origins of *The Story of Forgetting*’ <http://www.stefanmerrillblock.com/bio/origin.html> [accessed 03/11]

⁶⁴³ Merrill Block, *The Story of Forgetting*, p. 13.

retrogenesis –a consequence of the disease that justifies, and gives neurological connotations to, both the non-linear narrative structure and the puerility of his discourse on Alzheimer’s. Seth describes how ‘it’s not just memories that people with my mom’s disease forgot but increasingly basic things. How to write, how to speak, how to walk, how to sit up, how to swallow, how to breathe, and –eventually, after five to seven years –how to stay alive.’⁶⁴⁴ Abel depicts the gradual unmaking of his mother in similar terms, again implicating the novel’s occasionally ambivalent timeframe:

For every one day we grew older, Mama regressed ten. It was as if she were observing a movie of her life, except with the reel of film playing backward. For a brief time, the reversal of her life and the progression of ours came into perfect alignment [...] After a time, I became so accustomed to Mama’s life in reverse that, as Paul and I would eat, I would watch Mama, half-expecting her to un-eat: to un-digest, to un-chew, then return food to plate [...] Every reversal, every subtraction of memory, was a little death. The border between the existent and the non-existent, so certain for most, was a thing Mama would cross carelessly, constantly.⁶⁴⁵

For Abel, bodily amnesia is not constitutive of absence, disappearance, or diminishment, but *emergence*. For the Alzheimer’s sufferer, amnesia is narrated in terms of the body’s emergence as an explicit, unruly object as the individual loses or ‘forgets’ the tacit self-command and experiential invisibility that characterises the unobtrusive, unconscious healthy body. Abel describes the anarchic sensations and postures that become more pronounced with ageing: ‘my body parts instantly rebelled. My liver puckered, my heart rose, my colon

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 181-2.

constricted, my elbows locked, all of my hair wriggled in their follicles.’⁶⁴⁶ He moves onto describe how:

I would crouch to lift eggs from the collection tray, and my knees would lock with a firm *no*, the jutting bones of my rear end crashing pitifully to the old hay, the eggs; gelatinous goo exploding in my fists. When I would bend to uproot my newly tumescent potatoes, my arms would have for a moment with a slow yet determined *maybe*, but my spine would soon pop with a harsh *not on your life*. As a right angle, I would hobble home.⁶⁴⁷

It is, then, the pathological ‘emergence’ of the body (or body part) with the aversiveness, constrictiveness and foreignness of pain that constitutes amnesia. Pain and dysfunction, giving the sufferer a heightened awareness of embodiment, reminds them of the incontestable reality of the body; yet the relation that pain invokes is construed as ‘amnesic’ in the sense the body is simply aversive and unfamiliar. Michel Serres articulates the healthy possessive terms: ‘*My body, my belonging, which behaves like a circle and turns in on itself [my italics]*’.⁶⁴⁸ Seth describes the total dissociation of mind from body: ‘[i]t’s just that her body is still here with us, but her soul has already gone to Isirora.’⁶⁴⁹

This materialist evocation of Alzheimer’s, focusing foremost on the body (although inextricably connected to intellectual and cognitive losses), is characteristic of all texts mentioned this chapter. *The Story of Forgetting*, like the others analysed, attempt to give the *mind* of an Alzheimer’s sufferer representable content. Johnson and Auster render Alzheimer’s a textual artefact, offering a jointly mental and representational sense of affliction that is either very visual to the reader or disrupts, compromises, or over-determines

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

⁶⁴⁸ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*, trans. by Margaret Sankey & Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 57.

⁶⁴⁹ Block, p. 175.

their interpretive processes. These texts are not simply about elucidating but *exhuming* the innermost geographies of the brain, and Merrill-Block's focus very much on the body and embodiment rather than on changes to intellect, personality, or cognition, foregrounds this physicality. What *The Wilderness*, *The Story of Forgetting*, and *Still Alice* do is foreground linguistic transitions, so that the neurological and the narratological (i.e. the subjective experience of Alzheimer's and the transitions the reader becomes cognisant of in narrative structure or voice) correspond to each other. Similar to *The Wilderness*, Merrill-Block compounds this physicality by correlating the neurological, the physiological and the architectural and makes absence paradoxically localisable. In the quotation below Block conflates mental oblivion, defecation, the clinical anonymity of the building, the loose and wrinkled skin of the residents' bodies, and the open, wordless mouths gesturing toward silence and vacuity:

Always the same smells of ammonia, urine, and the strong detergent used to over the odors more awful and true, those of old men and women crapping themselves.

Always the same blank linoleum hallways, as sunny and empty as the dementia-ridden, Haldol-pumped brains of the residents. Always their mindless gaping. Gaping at the enormous televisions screens everywhere. Gaping out windows. Gaping at the lime and ivory synthetic tiles of the floor. Always the loose skin of the old, skin hanging in ways skin was never meant to hang. Hanging in wobbling lobes from oversize ears. Hanging in sagging ridges from resting arms. Or hanging in jowls from the snarled, upturned faces of stroke victims⁶⁵⁰

Absence is a very physical evocation, just as the consummate blankness of amnesia is manifested and made localisable in the use of different linguistic registers and, for Johnson and Auster, an over-bearing and obtrusive narrative polemicism (which correlates to narrative

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

presence). Throughout the novel, Merrill-Block narrates Alzheimer's as a descent into anonymity, but, like Harvey's building-brain and narrative-neurology conceits, does so with recourse to the character's physical environment rather than psychical interiority. In the following quotation, he conveys an almost anticipative 'invisibility' or nothingness brought about by the characters' apparent indivisibility from their environment (which itself is brought about by their prosthetic relation to or symbiosis with it):

...the sidewalk bent to meet the artificially circular shore of a pond in a spanking-white promenade crowded with the institution's doddering residents, their expressions as meaningless and happy as the roses, their enfeebled bodies relying on all means of external structural support: aluminium walkers, the kinks of volunteers' elbows, the shoulders of visiting sons, wheelchairs both electric and manual.⁶⁵¹

In terms of this novel's focus on the neurological, however, the most valuable aspect to consider is the different narrative registers and what they imply about the nature of perception. Merrill-Block contrasts the directness of medical positivism and the ethereal detachment of allegory. The vocabularies in this novel are diverse and changeable, and the vicissitudes of the narrative are at times in obvious antithesis to the theme of determinism and ineluctable genetic destiny that governs this portrayal of familial Alzheimer's: 'I mean, really, what's the point of me existing at all when I'm just going to lose my mind?'⁶⁵² The novel, oscillating between case study and allegory, collides evasive and at times puerile rhetoric and lyricism and, as he terms, 'the strange lexicon of nucleic acid,' in which the latter is reduced to a sequence of letters: 'CAGATACAGAT' and so forth.⁶⁵³ Through these different vocabularies, he offers a sense of the pathos and ideality of forgetting: retrogenesis

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., p. 189.

⁶⁵² Ibid., p. 259.

⁶⁵³ Ibid., p. 106.

and ‘unsparing erasure’⁶⁵⁴ on the one hand and on the other the utopian world of Isidora –the etymology of ‘utopia’ of obvious significance here, combining the Greek *ou*, meaning no, and *topos*, meaning place, identifying utopia as *no* place.⁶⁵⁵ Merrill-Block describes how ‘Isidorans can’t hold on to any memory, even the memory of death, they never know that death is a possibility. The moment that an Isidoran dies, she will likely have just fallen in love again.’⁶⁵⁶

Whilst Block’s more neurological parlance offers at times a too intensely morbid preoccupation with mortality, the fable is connected to a more idealistic amnesia bound up paradoxically in the notion of immortality and the idea that ‘nothing was ever possessed and so nothing could ever be lost.’⁶⁵⁷ It is similar to Harvey’s depiction of Alzheimer’s as a different world, perhaps the world of fiction: a ‘*land of forgetfulness*.’⁶⁵⁸ Despite the linguistic differences, however, the delineation between the report and the allegory are arguably more equivocal. The allegorical portrayal of Alzheimer’s is, ostensibly, evasive, grounded as it is in notions of immortality and written with a child-like nature that is in obvious contrast to the subject of old age. However, as a result of frontal lobe damage in Alzheimer’s patients, many behavioural traits do approximate childlike behaviour, which is the meaning of retrogenesis –‘good second children’⁶⁵⁹ as Johnson describes, or as Merrill-Block comments, ‘not *dead* but *returned*.’⁶⁶⁰ The symptoms of retrogenesis are a generalised inefficacy, insentience, in some cases inability to read or recognise words (aphasia), and dependence upon others –all of which are depicted in Andrea Gillies’ poignant memoir

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 180.

⁶⁵⁵ Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan, ‘Utopian Studies’ in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. by Mark Bould (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 308-17, (p. 314).

⁶⁵⁶ Block, p. 38.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

⁶⁵⁸ Harvey, p. 43.

⁶⁵⁹ B.S. Johnson, p. 185.

⁶⁶⁰ Block, p. 182.

Keeper.⁶⁶¹ Block describes the influence for writing the novel in a similar vein: 'I began to think about the terrible and inevitable role reversal that has taken place in every generation of my mom's family: the time when the child must become the parent's caretaker.'⁶⁶² Thus the childlike allegory is not evasive but may be construed as a neurological marker, and might in fact be argued to be comparable to the incisive, genetic and neurological that Merrill-Block juxtaposes alongside it. Rhetorical or metaphorical vocabulary, he seems to suggest, does not necessarily evade or repress but present itself as a topography of the demented or dementing brain, existing reciprocally with (or perhaps *as*) neurological discourse.

In addition to his linguistic oscillations, Merrill-Block, in a sly fictional self-consciousness, alludes to the act of writing when conveying the ineluctable fate—the 'doomed neurology'⁶⁶³—of Alzheimer's sufferers. Whilst this novel is in no definitive sense metafictional, he alludes to the writing process as a metaphor for the deleterious effects of the disease on the individual, describing life itself as:

...burdened with its endless typing and retyping, making its small innovations as it perpetually will. A typo here, an omission there, a rearrangement of genetic test for the sake of diversity itself, an endless process of trial and error, making new offerings that may or may not prove helpful to its living creations.⁶⁶⁴

One might offer this quotation up as a description of *House Mother Normal*, a text that explicitly offers up typographic oddities and mistyping as textual symptoms. Whilst *The Story of Forgetting* has not the narrative polemics of *House Mother Normal* or *Travels in the Scriptorium* he offers the fictionality itself up as a metaphor for symptom. When Seth's empirical investigations take him to Alzheimer's sufferer Mr. Hamner, he describes the diary

⁶⁶¹ Andrea Gillies, *Keeper*, p. 77.

⁶⁶² Block, 'On the Origins of *The Story of Forgetting*'.

⁶⁶³ Block, *The Story of Forgetting* p. 45.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

he keeps with names of visitors, their business, and the date visited, which functions almost as a prosthetic memory for Hamner. On reading of these events the man describes how:

I pull it out and just read it through like a novel. Like a novel, except that I'm the main character and every day it seems almost entirely new to me. I guess I'm lucky that way. Most people don't ever get to read about their own lives with complete objectivity.⁶⁶⁵

The very reader is embroiled in the sense of determinism that Merrill-Block conveys. For the reader, the novel is inevitably complete on first opening –and so, therefore, is the character, with his or her fate already ‘written’, condemned to typescript. This relation between reader and text is comparable to the relationship between Seth and his genetic diegesis –his DNA and, as he describes, the ‘strange lexicon of nucleic acid.’⁶⁶⁶ His genetic ‘narrative’ is already written in the body and all its constituent parts, and the reader’s possession of a character’s past, present, and future, is paradigmatic of Hamner’s possession and reading of the ledger. Seth and Abel’s narratives both hinge on a sense of conformity to or fulfilment of genetic destiny as well as a suggestively metafictional subservience to a narrative which itself is metaphor for genetic predisposition: ‘[h]ow can I live when I know I’ll just end up like that? Forgetting everything.’⁶⁶⁷ Merrill-Block gives the reader a jointly textual and genetic sense of condemnation in the sense that the very book they are reading is the exemplar of familial Alzheimer’s, for the character’s life and fate is complete even prior to the animation bestowed on them through reading. Thus the ‘story’ of forgetting is the genetics, aetiology, and teleology of Alzheimer’s disease.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 153.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 264.

In the postscript to her novel *Still Alice*, Lisa Genova describes how it is the intention of the novel to:

...sit the reader right up against her [Alice's] Alzheimer's. It should feel uncomfortably close at times. You should feel her confusions and frustrations and terror right along with her. And yes, this choice forces us to lose what's going on inside her thoughts of her husband and the other characters, but we get an insider's perspective into the mind of someone slipping further and further into Alzheimer's. Most people without Alzheimer's never get to sit in that seat.⁶⁶⁸

This novel follows the character of Alice Howland who is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's. It follows her as she 'loses her ability to rely on her own thoughts and memories, as she loses her cerebral life at Harvard, when she'd placed all her worth and identity.'⁶⁶⁹ The novel dramatises both Alice's experience of Alzheimer's disease and the narrative problems inherent in a first-person account of a condition that irretrievably damages first-person subjectivity. Like *The Wilderness* and *The Story of Forgetting*, some of Genova's stylistic decisions are indicative of the ways in which literature and neurology can illuminate each other. In the preface to the novel, Genova writes with a dispassionate, clinical impassivity: '*Even then, more than a year earlier, there were neurons in her head, not far from her ears, that were being strangled to death, too quietly for her to hear them.*'⁶⁷⁰ In providing the reader with a definitive prognosis prior to the character's awareness, she tacitly conditions an impassive and anticipative 'medical gaze' in the reader. Privileged with this foreknowledge, we are not simply asked to anticipate, but search the text for evidence of, Alice Howland's decline. As such the interpretative liberties of the reader are delimited to some extent by the aetiology and teleology of Alzheimer's disease. Genova, on revealing

⁶⁶⁸ Lisa Genova, 'Postscript', *Still Alice*, p. 307.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Alice's condition, sets up clear diagnostic boundaries, limitations, and possibilities within which literary erudition takes place. Genova does not simply construct a fiction *about* illness, but seeks to equate aspects of the fiction –specifically the linguistic processes involved in metaphor –to the illness. The diagnostic clues or textual symptoms encompass everything from the dropping of possessive pronouns (e.g. *my* daughter becomes ‘the pretty woman (260); ‘the actress’ (261); ‘the mother’),⁶⁷¹ to the transition from a lucid and dispassionate etiological vocabulary to imprecise and explicitly metaphorical speech. This text is not only grounded in the positivism of medical epistemology, but offers statistical information, which emphasises the novel's didactic role: ‘*There are an estimated five hundred thousand people in the United States with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Early onset is defined as Alzheimer's under the age of sixty-five. Symptoms can develop in the thirties and forties.*’⁶⁷² However, in contrast to this and the nomenclature Genova is familiar with as a neuroscientist, the more poetically and rhetorically embellished passages, whilst being more accessible to the literary scholar, effect a sense of distance from the subject matter. The novel oscillates between medical and literary discourse, the former offering a crude, unambiguous, unembellished and excessively morbid account of Alzheimer's, and the latter pushing the reality and pathos of the disease into a counterintuitive latency. Literary discourse, for Genova, is an aesthetics of deviation, a language whose connotative dimension and semantic open-endedness give the illusion of multiple realities and makes the reader aware of a ‘literal sense’ that is always ‘transported, diverted from itself.’⁶⁷³ Genova tacitly equates metaphoricity and neuropathology. The changing linguistic registers in the novel carry implied neurological connotations, which are played out in reader-response: in the more florid or densely metaphorical sections the reader must infer its meaning, whilst the literal,

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 260-1.

⁶⁷² Ibid., p. 208.

⁶⁷³ Catherine Malabou & Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath: Travelling with Jacques Derrida*, trans. by David Wills (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 215.

medical vocabulary is built much more on logical entailment. There is a palpable tension in this novel (embodied in its linguistic inconsistencies) between Genova's obvious desire to educate –to procure insight into the biomedical realities of Alzheimer's –and her authorial obligation to create, invent, imagine and embellish. It is this very antagonism that is central to Genova's portrayal of Alzheimer's disease, and as I shall be arguing in this part of the chapter, we are no more aware of the reality and teleology of the disease than in this novel's stylistic fluctuations.

The narrative is in the form of an internal monologue with occasional dialogue, and this lends it some degree of subjectivity; but her voice is split: it dramatizes her condition while at the same time analysing it with some degree of rational control. The protagonist, Alice, is both a sufferer of Alzheimer's disease and a neuropsychologist analysing her own deterioration 'with a passionate quest to understand the mind.'⁶⁷⁴ Her self-distance, then, might be considered to be at once pathological and vocational, self-alienated and self-diagnosing. The most notable quality of this novel is Genova's attempt to represent the differential quality of Alice's voice as her role as a practitioner collapses into that of patient with the onset of the disease. This is made evident in the letter she writes herself before the onset of her most severe symptoms:

*Dear Alice, You wrote this letter to yourself when you were of sound mind. If you are reading this, and you are unable to answer one or more of the following questions then you are no longer of sound mind: What month is it? Where do you live? Where is your office? [...] You have Alzheimer's disease. You have lost too much of yourselves, too much of what you love, and you are not living the life you want to live.*⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 271.

Whilst Genova has not the narrative polemics of B.S. Johnson, she does exploit and draw self-consciously upon the fictionality of the novel when attempting to depict Alice's experience of Alzheimer's. Alice is a neuropsychologist and her early reaction to her symptoms is one of clinical impassivity; she exercises an objectivity and self-distance that is initially vocational, but as she worsens, becomes more pathological. This transition is revealed as Genova alternates between positivist, neurological discourse in one moment, and a more rhetorically embellished, hermeneutical fictionalist account the next. Metaphor, which interferes with language's literal usage⁶⁷⁶ and interposes itself between the 'real' and the imaginative, is correlated with Alice's increasingly compromised engagement with her environment, her waning perceptual and somatic states, and even her cognitive/intellectual losses. Although correlated with her increasingly 'unresponsive, disobedient, weakening'⁶⁷⁷ and less analytical mind, Genova's use of metaphor –indeed her use of literature –is in no way pejorative. In tacitly equating metaphoricity and neuropathology, she draws conscious attention to the role of literary discourse in communicating medical information and procuring insight into the subjective experience of sickness and disease. Alice's greatest anxiety in the novel is over language and the nature of thought, and on several occasions she attempts to convince herself that 'the fact she had Alzheimer's didn't mean that she couldn't think analytically.'⁶⁷⁸ The dispassionate neurological parlance in the novel signifies the control and lucidity of the medical gaze, objectifying Alice's condition and implicitly equating itself with health. But poignantly, the inclusion of a more rhetorical style, combined with the reader's conscious awareness of its polysemy, preciosity, imprecision and narcissistic self-referentiality, work to subjectify Alice's condition and conflict with the incisive, technical neurological parlance that has come, if implicitly, to signify control. Sofie

⁶⁷⁶ Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor: The Critical Idiom*, ed. by John D. Jump (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1972), p. 2.

⁶⁷⁷ Genova, p. 166.

⁶⁷⁸ Genova, p. 187.

Vandamme and Arko Olderwald comment how ‘metaphorical thinking should be avoided when talking and writing on personal experience of illness because metaphorical language colours the “real” experience of illness.’⁶⁷⁹ Yet, in *Still Alice*, metaphor is an extension of medical discourse and the nomenclature of Alzheimer’s disease; it does not depart from but equates itself with the realities of disease, and is a significant part of what is a thoroughly and self-consciously didactic novel. As Alice falls victim to Alzheimer’s the text lapses more frequently into a decorous, florid, non-literal vocabulary, and as Alice comes to question the accuracy and verisimilitude of her reality Genova draws increasingly heavily on the philological and exegetical problematics of textuality. Paradoxically it is the *fictionality* of the novel, as made explicit through the change in linguistic register, becomes synonymous with the *reality* of Alzheimer’s disease –literary discourses here working as a neurological marker in the same instance it departs from empirical reality.

Speaking of the role of narrative in elucidating the experience of illness, Arthur W. Frank comments that ‘hearing traces of the body in the story is not easy. Observing what stories say *about* the body is a familiar sort of listening; describing stories as told *through* the body requires another level of attention.’⁶⁸⁰ Alice’s experience with Alzheimer’s is explored through her declining language skills. Genova describes how ‘her ability to use language, that thing that most separates humans from animals, was leaving her, and she was feeling less and less human as it departed.’⁶⁸¹ The transition from medical explication to literary evocation, with its lack of semantic constraints, its complex and aleatory inventory of allusions, juxtapositions and permutations, and its plethora of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms, captures that loss of control that Alice Howland finds in medical

⁶⁷⁹ Sofie Vandamme et al., ‘Myths and Metaphors Reconsidered: Nancy Versus Sontag’ in *Making Sense of Health, Illness, and Disease*, ed. by Peter L Twohig and Vera Kalitzkus (The Netherlands: Eidtions Rodopi, 2004), p. 141.

⁶⁸⁰ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (London: University of Chicago Press, Ltd., 1995), p. 2.

⁶⁸¹ Genova, p. 270.

discourse, as well as the hallucinations and the plural, inimitable realities that she alone experiences. David Keck describes of Alzheimer's that 'when we are confronted with the reality of living cognitive dissolution, we may be inclined towards respecting the integrity of everyday language, something which we had heretofore taken for granted.'⁶⁸² This 'everyday language,' for Alice, is that of medical discourse. Genova draws attention to the different ways in which reality changes depending on the discourse, the lens, through which it is articulated and perceived. For instance, we are invited to contrast this much more figurative description:

The words, the information, the meaning in the woman's questions and in Alice's own answers were like soap bubbles, the kind children blew out of those little plastic wands, on a windy day. They drifted away from her quickly and in dizzying directions, requiring enormous strain and concentration to track,⁶⁸³

With the more elucidative and medically attuned:

The neural pathways I use to try to understand what you are saying, what I am thinking, and what is happening around me are gummed up with amyloid. I struggle to find the words I want to say and often hear myself saying the wrong ones. I can't confidently judge spatial distances, which means I drop things and fall down a lot and can get lost two blocks from my home.⁶⁸⁴

Whilst the latter communicates Alice's problems directly and dispassionately, the manner in which the first quotation is written plays more conspicuously on the tacit association built up over the course of the novel between metaphoricity and neuropathology. In the first example, Alice is unable to articulate ideas scientifically as she ordinarily would, and the implied

⁶⁸² David Keck, in *Forgetting Whose We Are*, p. 79.

⁶⁸³ Genova, p. 241.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

distance embodied in metaphor and simile matched by the comparably remote third-person pronoun ‘her’ and the adoption of a heterodiegetic narrative voice. This is indicative of her *pathological* self-distance. By contrast, the second example, whilst spoken with recourse to metaphor is lucid and scientific, narrated homodiegetically with the possessive pronouns ‘I’ and ‘my’ and with more of a *vocational* self-distance. She writes how ‘soon, although I’ll still now what it is like, I’ll be unable to express it to you,’⁶⁸⁵ and this tension between a didactic versus hermeneutic fictionalist account –between medical discourse (which aims to be direct, transparent, and precise) and literary discourse (with its recourse to metaphor and indeterminacy) –forms the basis of this ‘subjective’ portrayal. As Terence Hawkes comments, ‘poetical effects are seen, outside of poetry, almost as a vice of language’ in the sense that, being less transparent, they can constitute ‘distracting effects.’⁶⁸⁶ This is precisely what Genova creates as she alternates between a specialist neurological parlance and a more decorous and rhetorical style, as well as between a first- and third-person, homo- and heterodiegetic narrative voice, to give an indication of her loss of ‘psychic accuracy.’⁶⁸⁷ Arthur W. Frank comments that ‘in the silences between words, the tissues speak,’⁶⁸⁸ and certainly for Genova it is the lacunae in literary discourse –the imprecision, implicature, and irreducible polysemy, and lack of a semantic teleology –that offers insight into the body, or in this case brain, and embodies how, for Alice, ‘the whole landscape of life lies remote.’⁶⁸⁹ Vandamme and Olderdald term metaphor a ‘linguistic problem’ for illness narratives –one that is ‘unrelated to the reality of being ill.’⁶⁹⁰ For Genova it conveys Alice’s cognitive and intellectual decline, rendering the linguistic traits more commonly associated with literature implicitly symptomatic, and correlating the non-metaphorical, more precise and analytical

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 251.

⁶⁸⁶ Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor*, p. 10.

⁶⁸⁷ Genova, p. 249.

⁶⁸⁸ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, p. xii.

⁶⁸⁹ Woolf, ‘On Being Ill’, p. 195.

⁶⁹⁰ Sofie Vandamme et al., *Making Sense of Health, Illness, and Disease*, p. 144.

paradigms with an inverse reality: health. This sense of indirectness or remoteness is something Alice experiences as she attempts to articulate herself:

She wanted to tell her that she was proud of her. But her thoughts from idea to mouth moved too slowly today, as if they had to swim miles through black river sludge before surfacing to be heard, and most of them drowned somewhere along the way.⁶⁹¹

The nature of metaphor is fitting for what she is communicating here. The contrastive etiological rhetoric embodies that lucid medical gaze and is diagnostic, referring to Alice's neurological state; but it is also meta-linguistic in the sense that Alice's condition, specifically her waning intellectual abilities, is indistinguishable from, and reducible to, the metaphorical language employed to represent it. Thus Genova's narrative has as much Alzheimer's as *itself* as its referent—its implied subject of diagnosis. Genova compounds this narrative—neurology conceit as she represents the 'world of dementia'⁶⁹² and the neurodegeneration it entails as an insidious fictitiousness. Alice's status as a character often blends with her status as an Alzheimer's sufferer. Alice describes her 'growing distance from her self-awareness [and] her sense of Alice [...] [of] what she knew and understood, what she liked and disliked, how she felt and perceived,'⁶⁹³ and in this the neurological bleeds into the authorial as her awareness of her *condition* seems at times synonymous with her awareness of her *characterisation*. Describing her condition, Alice comments on how she 'almost felt like a character in a play, this woman with Alzheimer's disease,' and how 'she felt like a fraud, posing as a Harvard professor.'⁶⁹⁴ She even envisions her fate less in terms of a reality and more in terms of a narrative: 'John [her husband] would become the informant, and Alice

⁶⁹¹ Genova, p. 225.

⁶⁹² Ibid., p. 208.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., p. 242.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid. pp. 131 & 96.

would become the dying, incompetent patient. She wasn't ready to turn herself in.⁶⁹⁵ It is as if, at times, Alice has knowingly entered a fictional illusion and that she is aware of her status as a character in a novel and the need to 'inhabit this new world she found herself in, this world of dementia'⁶⁹⁶ and navigate through 'this Dr. Seuss land of neither here nor there.'⁶⁹⁷ Her entire identity, like Mr. Blank's in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, is reducible to a series of notations. Dropping the pronouns 'I', 'me', and 'my' she begins to describe herself more impassively and objectively as simply 'this poor unfamiliar woman,'⁶⁹⁸ or 'a woman she didn't know'⁶⁹⁹ She becomes reliant on a piece of paper which becomes her prosthetic memory (in the same way the ledger does for Mr. Blank and the tape recorder for Krapp) whilst also alluding to the artifice and terminal constructedness of her character. The textual, neurological, existential, and vaguely metafictional are conflated as her ability to remember her identity –indeed to *have* an identity –is dependent on retaining a piece of paper upon details about herself are written. As she explains, '[e]verything she did and loved, everything she was, required language.'⁷⁰⁰ Genova writes how:

Alice tucked a piece of paper with her name, address, and phone number in her sock. Of course, if she became so confused that she didn't know her way home, she might not have the presence of mind to remember that she carried this piece of helpful information on her person.⁷⁰¹

However, one of the most unsettling instances in *Still Alice* is when Alice is unable to leave the house:

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 253

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 227

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 74.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., p. 96.

She raced to the front hallway, but then stopped before she could reach the door. It was the strangest thing. There was a large hole in the floor just in front of the door. It spanned the width of the hallway and was about eight or nine feet in length, with nothing but the dark basement below it. It was impassable [...] The mail had just been delivered through the slot in the door, and it lay on the top of the hole, somehow hovering there.⁷⁰²

Genova suspends the ‘truth’, later revealing the hole to be a decidedly more benevolent ‘black hallway rug,’⁷⁰³ later qualified (and rationalised) by: ‘*Floating mail. My brain is fried!*’⁷⁰⁴

As Alice’s reality is experienced as a series of hallucinogenic, fictional occlusions, the novel’s very fictionality gains neurological, and hence *realist*, connotations. Alice’s allusions to herself as fictional character prior to this are certainly important, for imaginative or delusory realities, being clearly within the remit of a ‘fictional’ world, thus hold some degree of expectation, some normalcy, for the reader –as indeed it does for Alice. In the same way she plays on the tension between florid and scientific speech, Genova exploits mechanisms of pretense, make-believe, and non-existent things involved in hermeneutic fictionalism⁷⁰⁵ in this evocation of alterity. She also draws on the reader’s level or degree of expectation and acceptance, and what the reader expects and considers normal for fiction becomes synonymous with what is *not* normal for Alice, but what, ultimately, she comes to accept as normal as she deteriorates. In their study of narrative approaches to disease, illness and disability Valarie Raoul et al ask: ‘what difference does it make if the story is framed as truth

⁷⁰² Ibid., pp. 206-7.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., p. 211.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵ Jason Stanley, *Figurative Language*, ed. by Peter A. French & Howard K. Wettstein, vol. 25 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001), pp. 36-9.

or fiction?’⁷⁰⁶ For Genova, it seems, placing the story in the interstice between truth and fiction, metaphorical and neurological parlance, is fundamental to the portrayal of Alice’s decline, and over the course of the novel it is the world, or more particularly the *language*, of fiction that embodies the profoundly alienating reality of Alzheimer’s disease.

iii) Conclusion

Critics across the medical humanities have stressed ‘the *need* of ill people to tell their stories, in order to construct new maps and new perceptions of their relationships to the world,’ as well as ‘the *embodiment* of these stories: how they are told not just about the body but through it.’⁷⁰⁷ The potential role of narrative in medical education and practice is highlighted by Arthur Kleinman, who comments:

Illness narratives edify us about how life problems are created, controlled, made meaningful. They also tell us about the way cultural values and social relations shape how we perceive and monitor our bodies, label and categorize bodily symptoms, interpret complaints in the particular context of our life situation [...] One unintended outcome of the modern transformation of the medical care system is that it does just about everything to drive the practitioner’s attention away from the experience of illness. The system thereby contributes importantly to the alienation of the chronically ill from their professional care givers.⁷⁰⁸

I have argued in this chapter that the narrative polemics of B.S. Johnson and the narrative reticence of Paul Auster work as a topography of the dementing brain, whilst the use of

⁷⁰⁶ Multiple Contributors, ‘Making Sense of Disease, Disability, and Trauma’ in *Unfitting Stories*, p. 7.

⁷⁰⁷ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, p. 3.

⁷⁰⁸ Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (USA: Basic Books, 1988), pp. xiii-xiv.

different linguistic registers in *The Wilderness*, *The Story of Forgetting*, and *Still Alice* ostensibly signal different levels of consciousness and offer an implied correspondence between neurological processes and representational content. The aim of these narratives is to procure insight into the subjective experience of Alzheimer's. *House Mother Normal* and *Travels in the Scriptorium* in particular form an epistemological, or knowledge-based, aesthetic, despite the self-reflexivity, disaffection, and elitism that seems to underpin these hermeneutical examinations. However, like literary modernism, they also constitute an ontological, or being-based, aesthetic. The premise that this chapter has been working toward is that the Alzheimer's sub-genre, tethered though it is to a disease nosology, constitutes a second, more conspicuously 'medical' phase of literary modernism in its technical experimentation, its self-reflexivity, its preference for spatial and rhythmic over chronological form, its scepticism towards the idea of a centred human subject, and its sustained inquiry into the uncertainty of reality. The modernistic aesthetic follows from scientific, imperial, technological, and social expansion, and the lucrative material changes, accompanied by a collective and individual sense of crisis, result in its characteristically rebellious, disaffecting, questioning, introspective, and innovative literary aesthetic. Moreover, literary modernism is connected the overabundance of sense data with urbanisation, industrialisation, war, and technological changes, and a sense of estrangement or detachment from the empirical world. Alzheimer's narratives, likewise, are constructed around the senses and their compromise, not as a result of technological but medical change. It is a paradox that improvements in medicine and healthcare result in rising life expectancies, which in turn result in the creation and greater prevalence of age-related pathologies. Thus, while the modernist aesthetic is a reaction to industrialisation, technologisation, imperialism, urbanisation, and so on, the neo-modernist aesthetic of subjective Alzheimer's fiction is the pathogeny of modern medicine.

What makes contemporary subjective Alzheimer's narratives a re-engagement with literary modernism is a clear awareness of the complexities of the mind and its expression through the use of different linguistic registers, innovations in typography, narrative structure/voice, and syntax, and suspicion over, or self-consciousness of, language and narrative as a medium for evoking it. But, unlike literary modernism, this stylistic innovation and technical experimentalism is not an attack on rationalism and empiricism as it is grounded the rationalism, empiricism, and positivism of medical discourse. Contemporary subjective Alzheimer's narratives are a move away from logical exposition and often disturb the reader by adopting difficult, moot, or complex form or narrative voice, rejecting intelligible plots, characterisation or narrative structure, and at times defying clear interpretation. They constitute an exhumation not simply of the non-linear, free-associative processes of the thinking, conscious mind like with stream-of-consciousness, but the mind *as afflicted with Alzheimer's*. Like literary modernism, subjective Alzheimer's narratives offer a 'direct, intimate entry into consciousness,'⁷⁰⁹ and can be considered at once an exclusivist, at times arcane, and densely self-referential strata as well as a clear evocation of the empirical, material, and demographic changes in society. They are a response to medical progressivism just as their modernist counterpart was technological progressivism, and constitute a positivist, medically-attuned address to literary modernism. However, the dialogue between modernism and Alzheimer's that I have forged here does have farther reaching connotations. The work of Alois Alzheimer, to some extent, signified a reification of Classical etiological and proverbial discourses of ageing⁷¹⁰ as well as mythical, philosophical, or alchemical rhetoric on immortality. Alzheimer's work demonstrated how some of the salient characteristics of age –notably memory loss, behavioural changes, and cognitive and intellectual losses –are pathological, which gave greater credence to the quintessentially

⁷⁰⁹ Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), p. 39

⁷¹⁰ See introduction to thesis

western discourse of optionality –as seen in prolongevity medicine, the commodification of immortality in consumer society, the humanist fallacy and sophism anti-ageing, and of course the dictum ‘senectus morbidus est’⁷¹¹ that characterised antecedent medical discourses centuries before. Such discourses have presented old age as having a much more malleable and contingent relation to its antonym, youth, and in a postmodern spin on Pound’s dictum ‘make it new’ have surreptitiously repositioned or reconceptualised old age not in contrast to youth but a possible state of youth. The predilection in contemporary subjective Alzheimer’s narratives for stylistic innovation and refusal of a logical or holistic exposition signifies an energy and flair that is in stark contrast to, and seemingly repudiates, the nature of its subject matter. Indeed, one might express this by saying that forgetting *in* old age in contemporary literature is conveyed, stylistically at least, by forgetting *of* old age. Whilst the novels mentioned do offer, quite unequivocally, a thematic engagement with old age, the novelists’ appropriation of an energetic, disruptive narrative polemicism belies that subject matter and has more in common with youth and the modernist imperative to ‘make it new’. They may be construed as the perfect representation, then, of a culture at once ageing and anti-ageing, and the subtle repudiation of ageing can signify positively to medical accomplishments or negatively to social paradigms where people ‘avoid all reference to great age’ and where it is ‘a kind of shameful secret that is unseemly to mention.’⁷¹²

I asked in the introduction whether such literature is or could be considered medical or gerontological resource. Part of what the literature examined suggests is that our level of knowledge about a disease, as well as that disease’s prevalence in society, elicits or demands innovation and change in narrative technique and voice. The medical episteme has a formative role in the construction of these narratives, and the ensuing literary aesthetic is one

⁷¹¹ ‘Old age is a disease’ (Seneca) Multiple Contributors, *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, ed. by Malcolm L. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 22.

⁷¹² Simone de Beauvoir, ‘Old Age and Biology’ in *The Coming of Age*, trans. by Patrick O’Brian (London & New York: Norton, 1996), p. 1.

both modelled upon what Foucault terms ‘endlessly reproducible pathological fact’⁷¹³ yet one that aggressively reasserts the experimentalism, self-reflexivity, and hermeneutic liberties and aesthetic deviations more characteristic of the literary idiom. Alzheimer’s necessitates narrative change, and indeed that sense of energy, flair, and polemicism belies its very subject matter; but at the same time, converting neurological into textual symptoms, Alzheimer’s narratives are constructed around a set of narrative determinants whereby both authorial choices and the reader’s interpretative/methodological processes are enformed and dictated by ‘pathological fact.’ Thus I have also argued that in their medically-attuned aesthetic, the novels mentioned do not necessarily promote interpretative licence but represent a form of over-determination in reader-response and ‘seek to emulate the methods and postures of scientists.’⁷¹⁴ The texts discussed demand a clinicality or clinical impassivity when it comes to textual analysis. One becomes cognisant not simply of what is being depicted, but *how* it is depicted and why. The narrative techniques instrumental to the evocation of Alzheimer’s –especially when the author intends the narrative voice to emulate that of the afflicted –both X-ray the sufferer’s mind and collude with the disease and its destructive path, giving a jointly mental and representational sense of affliction. However it is the very spectacle of decline and decrepitude that provides a surprising opportunity for experimental renewal in contemporary fiction, and shows how an engagement with the pathos of senility can succeed in the same instance old age is repudiated, placed *sous rature*, or under erasure, through linguistic and stylistic innovation.

⁷¹³Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A M Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1973), p. 97

⁷¹⁴Judy Z. Segal, ‘Interdisciplinarity and Postdisciplinarity in Health Research in Canada’ in *Unfitting Stories*, p. 12.

LITURGIES OF A FICTION: ANTI-AGEING AND THE SEMIOTICS OF REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION

When defining science fiction, one might well turn to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous phrase 'willing suspension of disbelief.'⁷¹⁵ What this chapter examines are the ways in which Anglo-American incredulity and hostility towards the ageing process, the commodification of immortality in discourses of consumerism, the flourishing of biomedical interventions, and the cultural salience of anti-ageing are impacting literary representations of time, organic decay, and death, and de-sensationalising this fictional novum. Recent scholarship has focussed on the waning transcendentalism of this future-orientated genre, describing an incipient decline '[f]acilitated by technology' and 'the actualization of what science fiction narratives of old only imagined.'⁷¹⁶ The libertarian possibilities and imaginative epistemologies of science fiction are overcome by a prosaicness, triteness, and pragmatism as prolongevity medicine, the blandishments of anti-ageing, the superabundance of anti-ageing nostrums, dilettantish anti-ageing regimes all portray the limitations and cadences of the body as endlessly revisionary, and strive to give the illusion of a 'continuous present tense.'⁷¹⁷ As unrealistic cultural representations of ageing as optional or reversible⁷¹⁸ prevail and transcendentalist ideas and evasive, jargonised phraseologies such as 'turn back time', 'age rewind'⁷¹⁹ and 'age defy'⁷²⁰ begin to typify the everyday consumer vernacular, discourses of time travel and sempiternity are constituted within a new semiotics of realism. No longer the

⁷¹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, quoted by Amar Nath Prasad in *Recritiquing ST Coleridge* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2007), p. 211.

⁷¹⁶ D. Harlan Wilson, *Technologized Desire: Selfhood and the Body in Postcapitalist Science Fiction* (USA: Guide Dog Books, 2009), p. 25.

⁷¹⁷ Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: The Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 60.

⁷¹⁸ Stephen S. Hall, *Merchants of Immortality: Chasing the Dream of Human Life Extension* (New York: Mariner Books, 2003), p. 3.

⁷¹⁹ Boots No. 7 foundation but chiefly Maybelline products. See also products such as Maxfactor 'Ageless Elixir' Foundation; Age Defy Dermatology and Wellness, Inc. products/treatments with the slogan 'turn back the clock' [see: <http://www.agedefy.com/products/revercel/>]; and the 'Re:Nu Age Defy' range/treatments.

⁷²⁰ This phrase is not brand-specific as with 'age rewind', but is common to the majority of anti-ageing products.

cloistered, utopian realities and postulated future cultures of fantasy, the presumption of agelessness and perhaps even deathlessness pervade contemporary culture, from ‘cosmetic treatments and surgery; exercise and therapy; food and beverages; vitamins, minerals, and supplements; and cosmetics and cosmeceuticals.’⁷²¹ I will consider the extent to which aspects of the science-fictional idiom emerge as a new *prescriptive literature* in the context of rising life expectancies and demographic change –associated more with humanity’s libidinal fears of death, welfare systems, and meliorist efforts to restore public health in an ageing society, than they are the escapism, transcendentalism, and alternative vocabularies and epistemologies of science fiction. As Zygmunt Bauman argues:

mortality and *immortality* (as well as their imagined opposition, itself construed as a cultural reality through patterned thoughts and practices) become approved and practised *life strategies* [...] They also offer formulae for defusing the horror of death through hopes, and sometimes institutional guarantees, of immortality.⁷²²

With regards to the subject of age-transcendence, then, an element of realism pervades the postulated future cultures that science fiction has to offer, but also a historicity, rationalism and positivism given the domination of immortality and rejuvenation in medical practice and epistemologies for generations.⁷²³ This chapter works on the notion that immortality, rejuvenation, and prolongevity fail as transcendentalist or ‘quintessentially’ science-fictional tropes given both their historicist persistence in the medical episteme and their cultural saliency today in consumer discourses, welfare systems, and prolongevity medicine. I shall explore these issues with recourse to Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Michel Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island* (2005). Both novelists raise questions about the

⁷²¹ Juergen Bleudau, *Ageing, But Never Old* (USA: Greenwood Publishing Company, 2010), p. 14.

⁷²² Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* (California: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 9.

⁷²³ See introduction of thesis.

representation of ageing in the context of a culture whose discourses of ageing remain steeped in transcendental idiom that remains still largely contrary to its empirical environment. Moreover, I shall examine the questions both novels raise about the representation of time, trans- and posthumanity, and futurity in the context of a culture incredulous of mortality and alongside the realist tableau in which the subjects of immortality and rejuvenation now seem ensconced. Linguistically, these novels alternate between a social-realist and science-fictional parlance; ideologically, the technologisation of Man in these novels is construed as both humanistic and anti-humanistic, and conflates the subjects of affliction and transcendence; physiologically their characters are at once primordial and posthuman, mortal and sempiternal; and temporally, their novels are at once a projection of the future and a nostalgic evocation of the past. The narratives equate mortality and immortality, youth and age, corporal longevity and non-corporal immortality, antiquity and futurity/novelty, nostalgia and prognostication, imagination and entelechy, social realism and science fiction. Margaret Atwood retrofits her immortal, futuristic beings with typically *human* anxieties and maladies. Likewise Michel Houellebecq renders his sleek, futuristic neohuman figures phlegmatic, incompetent, and above all, mortal, and as such implicitly correlates technological discourses with gerontological ones, utopian immortality with technofatalist dystopia, naturalism and transcendentalism. Both authors abandon any lucid separation of past from future, mortal from immortal, biomedical reality and humanist fallacy, and in the process render their characters highly conflicted, portmanteau figures with the attributes both of death-susceptible Neanderthals and potentially ageless trans- or post-humans. Both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Possibility of an Island* are novels where opposites collide. Atwood and Houellebecq construct binaries only to deconstruct them, and consequently the representation of time, both bodily and epochal, is demonstrably ambivalent.

i) Postmodern Timelessness: Prolongevity Medicine and the Commodification of Immortality

Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003) portrays an individual, Henry, suffering with a genetic disorder, chrono-displacement, which causes him to time travel spontaneously and uncontrollably. He is, as Niffenegger describes, a 'man out of Time.'⁷²⁴ She conflates a transcendentalist and reductionist, etiological rhetoric –the fantasy of time travel and the pathos of disease. Exploring this fictional novum within a mock pathography, she roots the literary and Gnostic imagination within the positivism of medical epistemology, and most provocatively of all brings the quintessentially science-fictional theme of time travel ever closer to biological reductionism. A palpable realism pervades and stultifies her fantasy as she 'naturalizes her conception of time travel, characterising it as a genetic condition in an ordinary world and describing it in terms of concrete physical sensations and reactions.'⁷²⁵ The patho-transcendentalist condition of Henry places makes him both suggestively immortal and ineffably mortal, and lends this novel an apparent but a self-doubting and attenuated science-fictionality. Both the novel and its protagonist are betwixt and between opposites: realism and escapism, mortality and immortality. Age in this novel is a fluid and completely unassignable concept, and often the protagonist, in his jointly transcendent and plaintive condition, is two different ages: 'Henry is 28 and 33.'⁷²⁶ For Henry, 'past present and future all coexist simultaneously' and describes how 'you can always go back. Most people are glued to the present; you get to be there again and again'⁷²⁷ –a fable perhaps of consumer society and the hopes, promises, and blandishments of anti-ageing. The

⁷²⁴ Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife* (London: Vintage Books, 2005), p. 5.

⁷²⁵ Geoff Hamilton et al., *Encyclopaedia of American Popular Fiction* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 348.

⁷²⁶ Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, p. 131.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 77 & 207.

themes and various conceptual antinomies arising from this novel are a useful way to explore the postmodern lifecourse. In an anti-ageing culture, empiricism falters in the face of such ideology: that is, Anglo-American culture has never been more familiar with the concepts of immortality and rejuvenation (or reversing age) than in the period where medical and scientific capability extend life and render unavoidable that which it seeks to disinvent: old age. In other words, anti-ageing is contradicted by the very reality it creates. Contemporary culture is placing antithetical and incompatible demands on literature. Oneiric fantasies of immortality are both contradicted in and validated/reified by contemporary medical practice. Like time travel for Niffenegger, sempiternity is naturalised in contemporary culture: incorporated into the very fabric of reality and rendered far more quotidian as it becomes the hallmark of consumer capitalism, a bureaucratic and scientifically sophisticated ideology, a new form of humanism in an ageing society, and new healthcare paradigm loaded with possibilities of 'buy[ing] this prolongation.'⁷²⁸ In the same way *The Time Traveler's Wife* combines the sobriety of a disease and the oneirism of time travel, anti-ageing discourses too conflate the positivism of medicine with the transcendentalist argot of the science fictionist. The trend toward a postmodern agelessness might be seen as yielding significant semantic change in works of science fiction, as alternative or conceptual realities and fantastic epistemologies are appropriated in discourses of consumerism and, if the central tenets of the American Association of Anti-Ageing Medicine (A4M) are to be believed, brought within the remit of medical and scientific plausibility. There is a growing affinity between time travel narratives and postmodern discourses of ageing. As Gary Westfahl describes, '[o]ne foundation of fantasy appears to be a longing return to the past, accompanied by the sense

⁷²⁸ Dimitrije E. Panfilov et al., *Cosmetic Surgery Today*, trans. by Grahame Larkin (New York: Thieme, 2005), p. 45.

that the passing of time has brought humanity only decline and degeneration.⁷²⁹ However, such a description might as readily refer to current healthcare paradigms and the medical episteme as science fiction and fantasy. Substantive research has been conducted into decelerated and arrested ageing, which are defined respectively as *slowing* the processes of ageing and increasing life expectancy and/or maximum lifespan, and *reversing* the processes of ageing ‘to restore vitality and function –akin to the rejuvenation theme that has been present in prolongevity myths and quests for millennia.’⁷³⁰ Although in previous eras reaching old age was something to aspire to, current demographic alarmism and the problematisation of age have recast ageing as something to avoid and the elderly as ‘just one more burden imposed on future generations by a society which continually feels ill at ease with nature.’⁷³¹ The commodification of youth and the seduction of a perpetual present seem to become increasingly dominant, or alternatively take on a different significance. Reflected in the medical episteme and not simply postmodern consumer discourses, one might purport ideas of reversing, suspending, or even disinventing age as not evasive but prescriptive. The President of A4M, Ronald Klatz, describes the ‘end to ageing and the birth of the ageless society.’⁷³² To what extent does the ideological force and cultural saliency of such discourses implicitly rewrite texts such as Mary Shelley’s short story ‘The Mortal Immortal’ (1833) about a protagonist who becomes immortal after drinking an elixir, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Benjamin Button* (1922) with its depiction of backwards ageing, and Virginia Woolf’s parodic biography *Orlando* (1928), with its depiction of a potentially ageless, transhistorical protagonist, as proto-postmodern texts of ageing? In a similar vein, how far can narratives

⁷²⁹ Gary Westfahl, ‘The Quarries of Time’ in *Worlds Enough and Time: Explorations of Time in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (USA: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 1.

⁷³⁰ Stephen G. Post et al., Introduction, *The Fountain of Youth: Cultural, Scientific, and Ethical Perspectives on a Biomedical Goal*, ed. by Stephen G. Post & Robert H. Binstock (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2004), p. 3.

⁷³¹ Frank Furedi, Foreword in *The Imaginary Time Bomb: Why An Ageing Population is not a Social Problem* by Phil Mullan (London & New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), p. xv.

⁷³² Ronald Klatz, Introduction, *The Science of Anti-Aging Medicine* (American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine: Chicago, 1996), p. xiv.

conveying nonlinear time⁷³³ be considered postmodern fables of ageing in the context of a culture that has naturalised alternative conceptions of time and sacrosanct promises of eternal youth?⁷³⁴ Although ludic fantasies of perpetual youth, rejuvenation, and immortality are in firm contradistinction to the empirical environment,⁷³⁵ they nevertheless flourish as discourses of ageing, become integrated into the everyday vernacular, and form new egalitarian hopes of dissolving age-consciousness and age prejudice through the presumption of agelessness. By converting nonlinear conceptions of time from science *fiction* to biomedical *fact* or possibility, anti-ageing articulates transcendentalist notions of the human lifecourse within quotidian, welfarist discourses, and in the process, perhaps, even yields new pragmatist conceptions of time travel and other fictional nova.

As Paul Nahin writes, ‘time travel is the ultimate fantasy, the scientific addition to the human quest for immortality’⁷³⁶ –a notion exemplified in the phrases ‘turn back time’, ‘age defy’, ‘age rewind’, and ‘turn back the clock’ that dominate anti-ageing discourses. Immortality has become a form of liberal humanism and secular optimism as people seek control over and insight into the ageing body, and reconceptualise as optional, reversible, or preventable the most quintessentially human of conditions: mortality. Anti-ageing is defined as:

...the application of advanced scientific and medical technologies for the early detection, prevention, treatment, and reversal of age-related dysfunction, disordered and disease. It is a healthcare model promoting innovative science and research to

⁷³³E.g., George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart’s play *Merrily We Roll Along* (1934), Edward Lewis Wallant’s *The Human Season* (1960), C.H. Sisson’s *Christopher Homm* (1965), the underground chamber called ‘Eternity’ where time stands still in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* (1967), Philip K. Dick’s *Counter-Clock World* (1967), Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal* (1978), and Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow* (1991), *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, or even J.G. Ballard’s short story ‘The Garden of Time’ where one can suspend the passage of time at will by picking flowers.

⁷³⁴ E.g. some products, including Garnier BB cream and Stem Cell 100, speak in terms of ‘miracles’.

<http://www.stemcell100.com/> [accessed 03/12]

⁷³⁵ Phil Mullan notes that by 2050, the number of individuals aged 65 to 84 world-wide is expected to grow from 400 million to 1.3 billion, and those 85 and over from 135,000 to 2.2 million. *The Imaginary Time Bomb*, p. xv.

⁷³⁶ Paul Nahin, *Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction*, 2nd edn. (Durham, N.H.: Springer-Verlag New York Inc., 1999), p. 3.

prolong the healthy lifespan in humans. As such, anti-aging medicine is based on principles of sound and responsible medical care that are consistent with those applied in other preventive health specialities.⁷³⁷

As Stephen Katz argues, ‘the chances of experiencing the aging of the body in a meaningfully temporal, open and unalienated way are slim.’⁷³⁸ Discourses of ageing today have naturalised alternative conceptions of time. Anti-ageing aims to ‘slow, arrest, and reverse phenomena associated with ageing’⁷³⁹ and to construct a body *outside of time* in a perpetual present. Medicine works on the basis that there is no intrinsic limit to age and can suspend or significantly delay the ageing process. Similarly, ‘consumer culture supplies the props and the environment, allowing for the construction of an eternal present’ and representing an arena where ‘ageing can effectively be abolished.’⁷⁴⁰ Linear conceptions of time are deconstructed as ‘consumerism and reversibility invites the possibility of eliminating many of the consequences of ageing all together,’⁷⁴¹ whilst prolongevity medicine likewise works toward ‘the reversal of age-related dysfunction, disorders, and disease.’⁷⁴² Consumers are invited to aestheticise or medicalise their way free from the infelicities of old age, and consequently the rhetoric of old age in affluent western cultures is dominated increasingly by a presumption of agelessness. The mature identity is articulated more in terms of reinvention, novelty, and subversion – a ‘transformation rhetoric’⁷⁴³ as Mike Featherstone describes – than fixity, finitude, and loss. As Ray Kurzweil comments, medical/scientific capability and life

⁷³⁷ Robert Goldman, ‘Anti-ageing Medicine: The Future is NOW’ in *The Science of Anti-Ageing Medicine* (USA: American Academy of Anti-Ageing Medicine, 2003), p. 253.

⁷³⁸ Stephen Katz, ‘Imagining the Life-Span: From Premodern Miracles to Postmodern Fantasies’ in *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, ed. by Mike Featherstone et al. (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 69-92 (p. 70).

⁷³⁹ Astrid Stuckelberger in *Anti-Ageing Medicine: Myths and Chances* (Hochschulverlag AD an der ETH Zurich, Switzerland, 2008), p. 2.

⁷⁴⁰ Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: The Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 61.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁴² Astrid Stuckelberger, *Anti-Ageing Medicine*, p. xiv.

⁷⁴³ Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Body Modification* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2000), p. 2.

extension or rejuvenation technologies will provide us with the means to ‘reprogramme our bodies’ stone-age software so we can halt, then reverse, ageing.’⁷⁴⁴ Science, medicine, and consumer capitalism together represent a demystification and dissemination of comparatively occult or transcendentalist notions of immortality, as well as secularising the premise of victory over death that underpins many monotheistic religions. As Gerald J. Gruman argues, the modern era has displaced religious orthodoxy. The subject of immortality ‘has become centred on the things of this world, especially on the increasing production and distribution of goods and services.’⁷⁴⁵ The range of accoutrements and biomedical interventions made available are proxies for religious doctrine –specifically, beliefs in salvation (i.e. through resurrection) by divine fiat. As Thomas Cole argues, ‘[u]nable to infuse decay, dependency, and death with moral and spiritual significance, our culture dreams of abolishing biological aging.’⁷⁴⁶ Irrespective of actual, manifest changes to the ageing process, immortality –ideas of transcending, defying, or reversing age –is an abiding feature of contemporary verbal habits. Some scholars have viewed the cultural rationalisation of immortality as contributing not simply to an increasing secularism but to what D. Harlan Wilson describes as a ‘*science fictionalization of reality*’ also. Wilson continues: ‘[w]hat used to be an alternative genre of scientific speculation and fantasy is rapidly becoming mainstream [...] and normalized in the real world’⁷⁴⁷ as ageing is placed under the remit of personal choice, and immortality the praxis of consumption.

⁷⁴⁴ Ray Kurzweil, quoted by Amy Willis, ‘Immortality only 20 years away says scientist’, *The Telegraph* (06 September 2009), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/science-news/6217676/Immortality-only-20-years-away-says-scientist.html> [accessed 09/11/11]

⁷⁴⁵ Gerald J. Gruman, A History of Ideas about the Prolongation of Life: The Evolution of Prolongevity Hypotheses to 1800, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, Vol. 56, No. 9 (1966), pp. 1-102 (1), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1006096> [accessed 20/02/12].

⁷⁴⁶ Thomas R. Cole, ‘The “Enlightened” View of Aging: Victorian morality in a New Key,’ in *What Does it mean to Grow Old? Reflections from the Humanities*, ed. by Sally A. Gadow et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 129.

⁷⁴⁷ D. Harlan Wilson, *Technologized Desire: Selfhood and the Body in Postcapitalist Science Fiction* (USA: Guide Dog Books, 2009), p. 22.

In contemporary affluent societies, ‘the life-span has been infused with rich cultural imagery based on the commodification, rather than the scientificity, of timelessness.’⁷⁴⁸ Through the apparatus of youth –including surgical, pharmacological, cosmetic and technological interventions –immortality and rejuvenation are subjects no longer mired in superstition, myths, and religion, but reconceptualised in far more corporeal terms, bound in rational, humanist discourses and medical probability. Woven into meliorist efforts to revive or restore public health in an ageing culture, immortality becomes a panacea to demographic change and transforms gerontophobia and pejorative attitudes towards the elderly into enlightened prejudice. Immortality and rejuvenation may be considered the epiphenomena of age prejudice and gerontophobia, commodity fetishism, scientific ambition, and egalitarian goals of health and wellbeing. The model of time ‘most often used in the sciences, including gerontology, is chronological, physical and “objective;”⁷⁴⁹ yet it is precisely this model of time that is challenged as medicine and consumerism avail us of products or treatments – cosmetics, surgical interventions, pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals –to help us ‘choos[e] how and when to age.’⁷⁵⁰ Ostensibly, time travel and immortality are no longer necessarily the antithesis to the empirical here-and-now: physical ageing is to a lesser extent identified and articulated in terms of the ‘linear flow of objective time,’⁷⁵¹ and as such discourses of ageing are opened up to more alternative conceptions on the direction of time. They are, to an increasing extent, articulated in terms of biomedical *realities*, postmodern discourses of *ageing*, and the ‘postmodern self-discipline on keeping the body “ageless,”’⁷⁵² rather than theological doctrines or fictional nova. Postmodern culture of ageing:

⁷⁴⁸ Stephen Katz, *Images of Aging*, p. 69.

⁷⁴⁹ C. Davis Hendricks et al., ‘Concepts of Time and Temporal Construction among the Aged, with Implications for Research’ in *Time, Roles, and Self in Old Age*, ed. by Jaber F. Gubrium (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1976), p. 14.

⁷⁵⁰ Paul Higgs et al., ‘Ageing and its Embodiment *The Body: A Reader*, ed. by Miriam Fraser et al (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 119.

⁷⁵¹ C. Davis Hendricks et al., *Time, Roles, and Self in Old Age*, p. 32.

⁷⁵² Stephen Katz, *Images of Aging*, p. 61.

...presents itself as freedom from constraint [...] For the postmodern sensibility, time, aging, and the historical past are not entirely real. They represent a “social construction” that we can change at will, whether in societies or in our individual lives [...] We have been told over and over again that it is time to “reinvent” old age and overcome demeaning stereotypes.⁷⁵³

One might postulate the time traveller or ageless human as representative more of the postmodern consumer and his or her dilettantish anti-ageing regimes, than the idealised indigenes of a remote and perfect future. One might even argue the time traveller or ageless human to be a personification of ‘our cultural preoccupation with challenging the limits of the human life-span.’⁷⁵⁴ The non-essentialism and nonlinear concept of time that pervade contemporary discourses of ageing bring time travel under the auspices of medicine and the remit of medical insight or capability. Through interventions such as ‘chemical skin peels to rejuvenate the appearance of the skin, scleropathy (removing distended veins on the legs), hair transplantation, facelifts and tucks, forehead lifts and blepharoplasty (correction of drooping eyelids),’⁷⁵⁵ the body becomes a site where past and future, youth and senescence, converge. The ‘postmodern’ body, Simon Biggs argues, is ‘a process of dispossession and cover-up, an exercise teetering on the brink of the grotesque.’⁷⁵⁶ It is an effort in disguise, suppression, and denial as the cosmetic surface strives toward the illusion of a perpetual present alongside the abject matter and concealed decay beneath. The outcome, Stephen Katz argues, is a postmodern lifecourse that is characterised by the ‘blurring of traditional chronological boundaries and the integration of formerly segregated periods of life.’⁷⁵⁷ The following dialogue from Victor Pelevin’s *The Helmet of Horror* (2007) is perhaps an apt

⁷⁵³ Harry R. Moody, ‘What is Critical Gerontology and Why is it Important?’ in *Voices and Visions of Aging: Toward a Critical Gerontology*, ed. by Thomas R. Cole et al. (New York: Springer Publishing Company Inc., 1993), p. xxxviii.

⁷⁵⁴ Stephen Katz, *Images of Aging*, p. 61.

⁷⁵⁵ Paul Higgs et al., *The Body: A Reader*, p. 118.

⁷⁵⁶ Biggs, *The Mature Imagination*, p. 75.

⁷⁵⁷ Stephen Katz, *Images of Aging*, p. 70.

representation of what, with anti-ageing, has become a deconstructionist undermining of binary oppositions, youth and age:

““What is the difference between an old man and a young man if you put them side by side?””

“One of them is old and one of them is young.”

“Yes, but what does that mean? That there is only a tiny little piece of the old man left in our dimension –he is almost completely submerged in Lethe’s waters of oblivion. But the young man is still all here –he has just barely touched the surface of the water. Isn’t that it?”

“I don’t know. The way things are these days, they could both go down together at the same moment.””⁷⁵⁸

Whilst the naturalisation of immortality and our habituation to such discourses may be seen as a rationalisation of science fictional tropes, it is also the fictionalisation of reality. As ‘none of the anti-aging products can truly treat aging or reverse it,’⁷⁵⁹ the presumption of agelessness that underpins anti-ageing places the ideology –and by extension western culture –between medical and scientific progressivism on the one hand, and the liturgy of a fiction on the other. Whilst prolongevity medicine is viewed as valid medical research grounded in diagnosis and prevention, the hegemony of youth and commodification of immortality in discourses of consumerism have been construed as a continuation of the stigmatisation of the elderly, a tendentious repression or evasion of the realities of ageing, and both a cultural

⁷⁵⁸ Victor Pelevin, *The Helmet of Horror*, trans. by Andrew Bromfield (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), pp. 155-6.

⁷⁵⁹ Juergen Bleudau, *Aging, But Never Old*, p. 18.

mythology and practice that disseminates and implicitly legitimises evasive or derisive attitudes towards ageing and the elderly. Ideas of *preventing* age characterise a great deal of the discursive medical and cultural history of ‘anti-ageing’, whilst the pathologisation of and institutional solution to age with the development of geriatrics heralded ideas of *curing* age. The prevention/cure dichotomy currently persists in medical and consumer discourses of ageing: anti-ageing medicine works on ‘preventing or rehabilitating a range of age-related diseases and incapacities,’ and is defined in far less contentious terms as simply ‘ageing “successfully.”’⁷⁶⁰ Anti-ageing in consumer culture is bound up more litigiously in promises of an indefinitely protracted youth, and presents the abundance of self-prescribed nostrums as ‘the *solution* to the “natural” ageing trajectory [my italics].’⁷⁶¹ One might suggest that contemporary culture is beset with a reality-fantasy nexus stemming from ideological and epistemological conflicts between medicine and consumerism –the first of which brands anti-ageing as rehabilitative, and the latter a more transhuman self-overcoming or vampiric agelessness. Discourses of consumerism are regarded by some in the medical profession as comprising ‘misleading or unsubstantiated claims’ and has having ‘little or no supporting scientific evidence of safety or efficacy.’⁷⁶² Anti-ageing, then, is beset by a disjunction: commercial and clinical efforts, reality and fictionality, science fact and science fiction. As Paul Higgs and Ian Rees Jones argue, the fight is to ‘make a distinction between legitimate attempts to treat old age and the diseases of later life by highlighting the quackery of much anti-ageing’ –the latter of which they term the “feckless” pursuit of vanity,⁷⁶³ which has little or no medical legitimacy. However, contemporary consumer culture has to some extent naturalised agelessness and rejuvenation –should perhaps have as its axiom the concluding

⁷⁶⁰ Astrid Stuckelberger, *Anti-Ageing Medicine*, p. xiii.

⁷⁶¹ Higgs et al., *Medical Sociology and Old Age*, p. 87.

⁷⁶² Astrid Stuckelberger, *Anti-Ageing Medicine*, p. 88.

⁷⁶³ Paul Higgs et al., *Medical Sociology and Old Age*, p. 88.

like of T.S. Eliot's 'East Coker' from *Four Quartets*: 'In my end is by beginning.'⁷⁶⁴

Immortality, it seems, has slid under the egalitarian ideology of health and wellbeing, and has become an increasingly prominent in welfarist discourses as life expectancies continue to rise.

Commenting on the technique of maintaining science fiction's internal logic, H.G. Wells describes how the writer must 'help the reader play the game properly, he must help him in every possible unobtrusive way to *domesticate* the impossible hypothesis.'⁷⁶⁵ Contemporary Anglo-American culture has 'domesticated' agelessness, incorporated it into the very fabric of the everyday, and transformed immortality into a new healthcare paradigm, transhuman self-overcoming into dilettantish beauty regime, transcendentalism into realist neutrality. As Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs comment:

...cosmetic surgery and related procedures will become part of everyday life, providing more and more people with the opportunity to mould their appearance to how they would like to be. Surgeons themselves see techniques improving as they become more widely used and the growth of computerized systems using photographs of patients that were taken in their youth in order to 'redesign' the face in advance of surgery offers further evidence of what Baudrillard termed the simulation and hyperreality of modern life.⁷⁶⁶

Although for Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick consumer culture 'with its images of youth, fitness and beauty lifestyles' produces 'a new set of exclusions for older people,'⁷⁶⁷ for some proponents of anti-ageing, old age is not in contradistinction to but a possible state of youth. This blurring of the life stages has both positive and negative connotations. It is well

⁷⁶⁴ T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker', *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 20.

⁷⁶⁵ H.G. Wells, *Seven Famous Novels* (New York, 1934), p. viii.

⁷⁶⁶ Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, *The Body: A Reader*, pp. 118-9.

⁷⁶⁷ Mike Featherstone et al., *Images of Aging*, p. 7.

documented to the point of cultural cliché that the elderly are infantilised by the betrayals of their ageing bodies and the attendant frailties and dependency on others. The physical habitus of extreme old age is said to emulate infancy –and geriatrics likewise to mirror paediatrics⁷⁶⁸ –and carries with it, albeit in more negative terms, the ideologies and central precepts of anti-ageing: turning back time. Similarly, Alzheimer’s disease is described in terms of ‘walking backwards in time.’ As Mark L. Warner moves onto describe:

As the disease progresses the patient loses his short-term memory, leaving him with only his mid-term and long-term memory. In time he loses his mid-term memory, and only his long-term memory remains –leaving him living in a world based on recollections of his past. As such, the past becomes the present.⁷⁶⁹

In this sense, youth is capable of connoting extreme old age and the pathologies of ageing, and this is paradoxical as youth implies growth, development, and fecundity but is used here to represent weakness, organic decay, and proximity to death. Articulating extreme old age through the ideology of youth, it might be argued, is perhaps a particularly familiar paralogism offering, if only implicitly in comparison to anti-ageing, a subtle repudiation of the realities of age. It is one such example where eternity has become located in discourse and not necessarily in medical intervention and actual, manifest changes to life expectancy and quality of life. As Jenny Hockey and Allison James argue:

[t]hrough metaphorical recourse to the positively perceived “limitations” or the child’s body [the] adults shield themselves from the approaching vision of illegitimate

⁷⁶⁸ Juergen Blaudau, *Aging, But Never Old*, p. 12.

⁷⁶⁹ Mark L. Warner, *In Search of the Alzheimer Wanderer: A Workbook to Protect Your Loved One* (USA: Purdue University Press, 2006), p. 5.

social dependency in old age. In doing so, however, the basis for the denial of elderly personhood is formed.⁷⁷⁰

The youthful body is a signifier of old age, and as Simon Biggs describes, ‘the past has become metaphor for the present.’⁷⁷¹ The physiological and representational are clearly at odds, and although the image of infancy, by its very incongruity, connotes loss and a pathological rather than transcendentalist reversion to youth, as Hockey and James note, the verbal habits which juxtapose youth and senescence in this way are in some senses salvatory. With anti-ageing, however, the young/old dichotomy is deconstructed not in the theory of retrogenesis and the infantilisation of the old, but in the emergence of what one might term the hetero-youth. The words ‘elderly’ or ‘old’ arguably do not reflect how malleable and fluid the mature identity is perceived to be under postmodern conditions. Under postmodern conditions one might understand the elderly as hetero-youth. The term refers to the nature of ageing the apparatuses and simulacra of youth, and the antinomies of the postmodern lifecourse that cannot be adequately expressed in the existential trinity of youth, middle-age, senescence, but transcends the cadences of physical nature and linear time toward a reality superior to that trinity and Eliot’s concise summation of ‘birth, copulation, death.’⁷⁷² Consumer culture and technological innovation have yielded the sort of novelty and subversion that was ushered in by modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost a century later, this modernistic upheaval and novelty is evoked in the postmodern lifecourse where, to put a postmodern spin on Pound’s dictum, the emphasis on the mature identity is to ‘make it new.’ The conventional indices of decay and decline were ‘based largely upon assumptions about the adult lifecourse as a period of productive labor followed by an unproductive retirement.’ However, the elderly –or hetero-youth –have entered an

⁷⁷⁰ Jenny Hockey et al., ‘Back to Our Futures: Imaging Second Childhood’ in *Images of Aging*, p. 143.

⁷⁷¹ Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination*, p. 63.

⁷⁷² T.S. Eliot, cited by James Kreuzer et al., *Modern Writings on Major English Authors* (USA: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), p. 622.

ersatz adolescence by virtue of physiological changes in the senescent body but by the *semantic* changes that this category we term ‘old age’ is undergoing. Such is the ideological force of anti-ageing, old age is a period of upheaval, experimentation, and newness: ‘[f]ixed conceptions of aging have, for many, been replaced by a much more fluid notion of later life as a period of experiment with a diversity of activities and identities.’ The theory of retrogenesis, or the demonstrably pathological ‘second childhood’ is here given more positive connotations. Biggs continues that ‘the management of identity is increasingly becoming a matter of surface impressions which can be adopted or shed with relative ease,’⁷⁷³ including that of senescence.

Although immortality, rejuvenation, and self-overcoming are qualities within the province of consumer capitalism and (albeit far less litigious) medicine, paradoxically they also exist within the auspices of gerontology –the branch of science that deals with the problems of ageing. I have suggested that discourses of immortality and fantasies about the conquest of time constitute a new semiotics of realism with the growth of the anti-ageing revolution. Mike Hepworth describes the lifecourse as ‘evidence that change is a fundamental feature of the human condition,’ but goes on to argue that this ‘does not mean that there is no such thing as a “core self” or sense of continuous personal identity.’⁷⁷⁴ This sense of continuity is particularly pervasive in sociological discourses of ageing as well as personal testimonials,⁷⁷⁵ meaning that couched within the verbal habits relating to old age is a celebration of continuity as well as a lamentation of the betrayals of the body and the losses that ageing entails. The psychology of ageing does not entail the same losses and sense of decline as physiological ageing; whilst the body may deteriorate the mind has its own distinct trajectory of decline, and may represent a source of continuity –even agelessness. As Simone de

⁷⁷³ Simon Biggs, ‘The “Blurring” of the Lifecourse: Narrative, Memory, and the Question of Identity’ in *Journal of Aging and Identity*, vol. 4, No. 4, 1999, pp. 209-221 (211).

⁷⁷⁴ Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing*, p. 29.

⁷⁷⁵ See André Gide and J.B. Priestly in chapter two.

Beauvoir argues, the individual possesses ‘a fluid, adaptable potentiality that *does age*, and a crystallized part of his mind, made up of acquired mechanisms, that *does not*.’⁷⁷⁶ She moves on to describe how ‘chronological age and biological age do not always coincide –far from it; and physical appearance tells more about the number of years we have lived than physiological examinations.’⁷⁷⁷ In a similar vein chronological age does not always reflect psychological age, whilst in terms of intellect ageing is synonymous with acquisition or consistency rather than decline and loss: ‘[d]espite bodily changes related to aging, most of the older persons retain their cognitive functioning, and it has been demonstrated that intellectual decline is more related to illness and disease than to aging.’⁷⁷⁸ In the anthropological work of Sharon F. Kaufman, interviews with the elderly revealed that ‘when old people talk about themselves, they express a sense of self that is ageless –an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with age.’⁷⁷⁹

From a psychosocial as opposed to biomedical perspective, discourses of ageing might be argued, paradoxically, to have clear intimations of *agelessness*. The perceived antagonism between the objective body-image (which ages) and the subjective self-image (which does not) precludes a linear understanding of time as applied to human ageing. This discontinuity between physiological and psychological ageing is reflected in the popular sociological metaphor of the mask:

⁷⁷⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. by Patrick O’Brian (London & New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 34.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷⁷⁸ Roberta Provenzano, *Roberta’s Papers on the Psychology of Aging* (USA: iUniverse, 2011), p. 6.

⁷⁷⁹ Sharon R. Kaufman, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 7.

A focus on masquerade implies a division of the self into hidden and manifest parts. Further, if one only sees the performance of a masque, this begs a fundamental and controversial question: is there an authentic self beneath these surface appearances?⁷⁸⁰

The binary truth/artifice becomes a proxy for that of young/old. The use of anti-ageing products is not necessarily understood in terms of a passive obeisance to the hegemony of youth, but a process of uncovering the putatively 'true' self—the origin lost under the cartography of physical maladies and inefficacies that cumulate with the passing of time. Psychosocial approaches to ageing challenge the notions of dependency, deterioration, stoicism, and passivity in old age and dissociate old age, it seems, from time: 'I don't think it really goes by the calendar at all. I think it goes by itself, your own attitude to life [...] People are never old, it's only when they look upon themselves as being old.'⁷⁸¹ This presumed agelessness and return to the historical past is, ironically, also a symptom of a notable pathology of age: Alzheimer's disease. For the Alzheimer's sufferer the illusion of youth can be a particularly poignant effect: '[h]e tends to live his life entirely for the present moment, although the present for him may be an era from his own distant past.'⁷⁸² With the exception of progressive dementias such as Alzheimer's disease, the psychology of ageing challenges the conventional indices of decline often ascribed to the physiology of age. S.J. Lupien and N. Wan describe how '[m]any people see ageing as a time of cognitive and physical decline,' but that recent findings have shown that 'well-being and a positive view of ageing are major protective factors against the effects of age on the organism.'⁷⁸³ Delaying, reversing, or disinventing the signs of ageing is perhaps more often associated with external intervention:

⁷⁸⁰ Biggs, *Journal of Aging and Identity*, p. 210.

⁷⁸¹ Paul Thomson et al., *I Don't Feel Old: Understanding the Experience of Later Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 130.

⁷⁸² Richard L. Gregory (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 185.

⁷⁸³ S.J. Lupien et al., 'Successful Ageing: From Cell to Self' in *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, Vol. 359, No. 1449, The Science of Well-being: Integrating Neurobiology, Psychology and Social Science (Sept. 29, 2004), pp. 1413-1426 (p. 1422), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4142144> [accessed 02/12]

cosmetic surgery, pharmacological interventions (e.g. Viagra and Hormone Replacement Therapy), self-prescribed nostrums such as creams and cosmeceuticals, and ideas of rejuvenation and sempiternity that are dominating the contemporary vernacular and becoming a defining feature of late capitalism. However, a psychosocial perspective views the deferral of age as something already existing and inherent in each individual. The psychosomatic model of ageing outlined by Lupien and Wan postulates an element of choice and free will in the ageing process as decisions, particularly with regards to socialisation, 'are linked to protection against physical and mental health conditions.'⁷⁸⁴ As previously discussed, the primary goal of prolongevity medicine and the specious interventions of postmodern consumer culture is (as the consumer axiom goes) to 'reverse the signs of ageing'. I have termed the effect a bathetic transcendentalism, as sempiternity and notions of a mythical, Ovidian rejuvenation are placed within the remit of medicine and commerce. Oneiric fantasies of suspending or reversing age are naturalised further by virtue of their inclusion in psychosocial perspectives and the 'strong evidence that positive self-concepts can have a reversing effect on what was once believed to be an inevitable declining process of ageing.'⁷⁸⁵

The implications arising are that the canonical indices of decline –and by extension, linear conceptions of time –do not adequately represent the human lifecourse, and even that the *conquest* of time may be articulated within discourses of ageing without entailing a denial or repression of the *realities* of age. Rejuvenation and sempiternity might be argued to be associated more with prevalence of old age than the absence of it: agelessness, deathlessness, and turning back time may be associated less with myth, religion, fictional nova and the Gnostic imagination, and perceived more as a bourgeois eschatology –connoting, in other words, a wistful preoccupation with organic decay and closeness to death in the face of the

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 1423.

aptly named ‘demographic time bomb’⁷⁸⁶ in all its associations with finality. Rejuvenation and nonlinear or alternative conceptions of time are to a certain extent emerging within consumer, welfarist, medical and gerontological discourses. As such they may be associated more with age-consciousness, contemporary verbal habits, and demographic alarmism than with the imaginative epistemologies and futuristic utopias of science fiction. As Ann Bowling and Paul Dieppe comment, ‘medical advances, escalating health and social care costs, and higher expectations for older age, have led to international interest in how to promote a healthier old age and how to age “successfully.”’⁷⁸⁷ Whilst rejuvenation and immortality have roots in religion, mythos, philosophy, and science fiction, their cultural saliency may be attributed to the existential and cultural anxieties rising out of the significant demographic change witnessed over the last century. Moreover, they might also be argued to have been conflated with egalitarian ideologies of health and well-being, medical and psychosocial discourses of ageing, and consumer capitalism. Immortality and rejuvenation are subjects that remain contrary to our empirical environment yet at the same time become trite, overtly familiar, and demonstrably prosaic in their everyday appropriation. Between subliminal beliefs in religious salvation on the one hand and on the other a secular optimism in the power of medicine, immortality remains somewhere between the realms of faith and praxis. Whilst it problematises linear conceptions of time and renders simplistic and to an increasing extent fallacious the existential trinitaries youth, middle age, and old age, and ‘birth, copulation, death’, the ideology of anti-ageing has its own temporal paradoxes. I have said that western culture has never been better acquainted with immortality than in the period where medical and scientific progress has rendered unavoidable and even extended the period

⁷⁸⁶ Phil Mullan, *The Imaginary Time Bomb*, p. 2.

⁷⁸⁷ Ann Bowling and Paul Dieppe ‘What is Successful Ageing and Who Should Define It?’ in *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 331, No. 7531 (Dec. 24 - 31, 2005), pp. 1548-1551 (p. 1548), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25455762> [accessed 20/02/12].

of life that Anglo-American culture strive so persistently, wilfully, and adroitly to suppress: old age and its attendant ills. Contrary to our empirical environment, agelessness remains a reality towards which we strive, yet it is one so demonstrably familiar and with such a rich genealogy, it borders on cultural cliché and contributes a palpable realism to many fictional novums and a historicity and retrospection to the imaginative future cultures science fiction has to offer. We have naturalised, become habituated to, and rendered prosaic a reality that is yet to be created, and this cultural diegesis that has persisted for generations has shown western culture, with regards to ageing, to be built so fundamentally upon the liturgy of a fiction –upon a concept so unequivocally contrary to reality, yet so familiar and so quotidian, that reality *is* fiction and fiction *is* reality. To what extent have the antinomies of the postmodern lifecourse and postmodern culture affected science fiction? Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* are two novels that I suggest could be read as postmodern texts of ageing. The novels take the form of a cyclical rundown, oscillating between the prognosticative and nostalgic, the transcendentalist and the disappointingly banal. The protagonists in both novels have futuristic bodies retrofitted with a crude, grotesque, and disappointingly familiar cartography of physical diseases and infirmities, and in a sly fictional self-consciousness echo the very novels' attenuated, self-doubting science-fictionality. A sense of exhaustion and disillusionment pervade *Oryx and Crake* and *The Possibility of an Island*, and through the novels' waning transcendentalism and their contrite, fatigable, and wilfully unconvincing novelty, Atwood and Houellebecq seem not only to be deconstructing science fiction and asking questions of its ongoing cultural function, but to be eulogising it. The characters are tenseless, transhistorical figures, both immortal and inescapably mortal, living in an environment resistant to periodisation, and I shall by analysing the extent to which the images of immortality, rejuvenation, futurity, and trans- and posthumanity constitute semiotic echoes of the postmodern lifecourse.

ii) **Ageless Humans and Senescing Machines: Posthumanity and the Mimesis of Decay in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Possibility of an Island***

The worlds portrayed by Atwood and Houellebecq are constitutive of both reality and fantasy; where sempiternity is both a futuristic, utopian projection and a nostalgic, disappointingly familiar cultural contrivance. *The Possibility of an Island* examines the human desire for immortality, and confronts the meaning of ageing and mortality in the context of technophilia and technological modification –and even considers posthumanism as a quasi-gerontological discourse. It is a parable of human development, examining the nature of humanity, society, morality, spirituality, emotion, and perception in the context of a technocratic society for which ‘the barrier of death is no more.’⁷⁸⁸ He confronts the question of what technophilia, technocracy, and extropianism (i.e. the idea that technological development will continue and expand indefinitely) mean to human evolution and our understanding of the categories of health and ill-health, youth and senescence, mortality and immortality, and secularism and spiritualism. Houellebecq interrogates binaristic thinking in *The Possibility of an Island* as he examines the self-congratulatory and triumphalistic humanism created through scientific progress and humankind’s developing ontological allegiance to technology. Houellebecq confronts these binaries in his exploration of a reality in which ‘the world no longer has the power to destroy us,’ a reality where the technologisation and deification of the body are equivalent, and where technological Man is fundamentally messianic figure, or even godlike in ‘the power to create.’⁷⁸⁹ He addresses the question: ‘is there a species destined to escape natural selection, natural disappearance –in a word, death?’⁷⁹⁰ Houellebecq’s attempt to answer this question is a complex and paradoxical one. Initially, he alternates between two narratives, which together form a relatively obtuse

⁷⁸⁸ Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, trans. by Gavin Bowd (London: Phoenix, 2006), p. 258

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁷⁹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (California: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 88.

and unproblematic binary: on the one hand, the scabrous hedonist and comedian Daniel1, whose material constitutes crass, eroticised, sardonic, and at times misogynistic commentary on female sexuality and the failings and foibles of mankind; and on the other, the sapient, sexually neutered, mechanical neohuman clones, Daniel24 and 25, set 1000 years in the future. Daniel1 is representative of the beginning of a process to immortality: ‘today,’ he writes ‘we are entering a different era, where the passing of time no longer has the same beaming. Today we enter eternal life.’⁷⁹¹ Houellebecq evokes what seems to be an unproblematically utopian vision of human eugenics, and consequently leads the reader into an all-too simplistic antithesis. Humanity is dystopian, characterised by predation, dereliction, class-consciousness, philistinism, xenophobia, misogyny, misanthropy, and the pseudo-colonialism of sex tourism in which middle-aged men in affluent western cultures, afflicted with ennui and frustration, travel in search of sexual encounters. Neohumanity by contrast is ostensibly an enlightened, unified, disease-free, post-capitalist utopia. Daniel1 represents ‘the first generation of the new species called upon to replace man [...] the zero point.’⁷⁹² The genealogy the reader is presented with (from Daniel1 to Daniel25) connotes an increasing ontological allegiance to technology, associated with which is the neohumans’ increasing distances from the diseases and physical maladies associated with their human ancestors. Indeed, the succession of Daniels seems to be a Nietzschean formation, not dissimilar to the *ubermensch*, or over-man, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885): ‘I am that *which must always overcome itself*.’⁷⁹³ As a series of clones, Daniel, who is at once descendent and antecedent, does indeed ‘overcome’ himself, and in a moment of sly fictional self-

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., p. 259

⁷⁹² Ibid., p. 259.

⁷⁹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. by Adrian Del Caro & Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 89.

consciousness alludes to this: ‘I played all the characters, thus taking my first steps down the road of the one-man show.’⁷⁹⁴

Houellebecq’s task, it seems, is to ‘mark a definitive break between the neohumans and their ancestors,’⁷⁹⁵ and it is a task, ultimately, that he fails to achieve. Houellebecq’s commentary is mixed, sometimes falling into banality and now and again sounding mystically portentous and evoking the transcendentalism which makes it more conventionally ‘science fictional’. Despite the binary on which this novel is represented structurally, the neohuman progenies Daniels 24 and 25 are more *human* than Daniel1, both psychologically and physiologically. Houellebecq equates neohumanity’s desire to distinguish themselves from the ‘animal atavism’ of humans with Daniel1’s hatred of mankind,⁷⁹⁶ and conflating transcendentalism with misanthropy renders it a far more necrotising, dysgenic force constructed out of ignominy and the wilful, deliberate destruction of humanity. Collectively, the neohumans are a nostalgic as well as a futuristic spectacle –residual, hyperbolic figures representative of the ‘assumption of agelessness’⁷⁹⁷ instilled in the bourgeois mentality centuries before.

Jacqueline Dutton argues that ‘the cult of youth has been embraced as the principal reason for regenerating oneself through cloning, so that youth represents the only remaining cause to strive for.’⁷⁹⁸ However, as Daniel1 later recalls: ‘even when we live in apartments, in conditions of thermal stability guaranteed by reliable and well-honed technology, it remains impossible for us to rid ourselves of this animal atavism.’⁷⁹⁹ Immortality, for Daniel1, is as transcendent as it is banal, associated less with enlightenment and more with consumer

⁷⁹⁴ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 12.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁷⁹⁷ Simon Biggs, ‘The Blurring of the Lifecourse : Narrative, Memory and the Question of Authenticity’ in *Journal of Aging and Identity*, vol. 4 No. 4 (1999), pp. 209-221 (p. 211).

⁷⁹⁸ Jacqueline Dutton, ‘Forever Young? French Perspectives on Aging in Global Communities of the Future’ in *Trans/forming Utopia: Looking Forward to the End*, vol. 1, ed. by Elizabeth Russell (Switzerland: International Academic Publishers, 2009), p. 20.

⁷⁹⁹ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 364.

capitalism, ‘turning youth into the supremely desirable commodity.’⁸⁰⁰ Immortality is also defined simply as a phlegmatic, recreational detachment: ‘all we’re trying to do is create an artificial mankind, a frivolous one that will no longer be open to seriousness or to humour, which, until it dies, will engage in an increasingly desperate quest for *fun* and sex; a generation of definitive *kids*.’⁸⁰¹ Daniell speaks of humans in comparably reductionistic terms, focussing crassly on the particulars of senescing bodies such as sagging breasts and erectile dysfunction –conditions which, for Daniell, become metaphors for humanity. He holds the particularly deterministic view that in old age ‘there was not a new blossoming at the end of the road, but a bundle of frustrations and sufferings, at first insignificant then quickly unbearable.’⁸⁰² The pathos of old age is depicted in Sisyphean, hyperbolic, grittily deterministic terms, and often in the text Houellebecq broadens out the subject of organic decay to hit more eschatological terms, commenting on: ‘the disappearance of religions, the difficulty of feeling love [...] the loss of our sense of the sacred, the crumbling of social ties.’⁸⁰³ However, as aforementioned, Daniell’s rhetoric on immortality is scarcely more inviting, as it is depicted simply as a continuation of his own licentious, vacuous existence ‘and its emptiness.’⁸⁰⁴ Mortality and immortality are, in Daniell’s diegesis at least, relatively indissociable. A sempiternal existence is, for him, as quotidian as it is transcendental, an indefinitely protracted misery and vacuity, and ‘the endless cycle of the reproduction of suffering’⁸⁰⁵ –an evocation indeed of Samuel Beckett’s thesis of procreation as a perpetuation of human suffering. Where Daniell represents entropy and a glum fatalism, the neohumans represent ‘incomplete beings, beings in transition,’⁸⁰⁶ sharing an obvious affinity with Julian Huxley’s conception of transhumanity (humanity as a work in progress): ‘man remaining

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 308.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., p. 26.

⁸⁰² Ibid., pp. 11 & 16

⁸⁰³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 114.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 343.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature.’⁸⁰⁷

It is evident early on, however, that Houellebecq’s representation of technology is by no means utopian and panacean; rather he uses technology to metaphorise aspects of ageing and mortality, and Daniel 1’s own ideas of immortality as a protraction of human misery and misanthropy, not its solution.

Despite the futuristic parlance of Daniel 24/5’s narrative, as the novel progresses it has less and less of an affinity with transhumanist discourses as the neohumans, demonstrably fatigable and afflicted with ennui, become ‘marked by a strangely human weariness, a sensation of vacuity.’⁸⁰⁸ It is as if the science-fictionality of these chapters, which at first opposes the social commentary of Daniel 1, is itself afflicted with a reciprocal exhaustion. The neohuman chapters in the novel, whilst separated from those of the human, exhibit a waning transcendentalism, a failure to elevate itself, in language, theme, and imagery, from the relative mundanity and triteness of Daniel 1’s narrative. Thus it not only ironises, and almost reconciles, the split narrative structure, but like Beckett’s *dramatis personae* the neohumans seem like decrepit machines, both mortal and sempiternal. Although remaining distinctly more pleasant than their human progenitors, Houellebecq’s neohuman figures are described in increasingly human terms and, in their asceticism, are defined more so by passivity, disaffection, ennui, and lack: lack of physical contact, lack of a society, lack of sexual pleasure, lack of empathy, and the ‘disappearance of poetry.’⁸⁰⁹ The neohumans suffer a disturbing cartography of physical maladjustments and infirmities, and as such a clear and incongruously banal existential alarmism seems to characterise the narratives of these ageless, post-historical, post-biological, even extraterrestrial figures. Technology, for the

⁸⁰⁷ Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation* (1927), quoted by Nick Bostrom in ‘A History of Transhumanist Thought’ *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, Vol. 14 Issue 1 (April 2005), p. 7.

<http://www.nickbostrom.com/papers/history.pdf> [accessed 30/08/11]

⁸⁰⁸ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 153.

⁸⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

neohumans, seems to entail a succession of subtractions and, like the serio-comic afflictions/affectations of the Beckettian anti-hero, becomes a conceit –an extended metaphor for age and its attendant ills, diminishments, disaffections, and malaise. As transhumanist artist Stelarc writes, ‘[b]ecause technology so successfully mediates between the body and the world, it disconnects the body from many of its functions.’⁸¹⁰ For Houellebecq, technology seems to magnify the biological reality of senescence, and the neohumans exist apathetically and despondently through what seems to be a paradoxically decadent, biological phrase of posthumanity. Houellebecq offers a sadistic vision of immortality where the technologisation of humanity is linked jointly to a transcendence of age and the mimesis of pain and dysfunction, disaffection and social ostracism, which can be argued to embody more conventional, stereotyped depictions of age. The subject of ageing pervades the neohuman narratives, and Daniel24 describes how ‘even if ageing does not have for us the tragic character it had for humans of the last period, it is not without certain forms of suffering.’⁸¹¹ The subject of mortality is not evaded or even repressed; rather, their evolution is described by Daniel25 as a ‘cycle of rebirths and deaths.’⁸¹² The neohumans and humans coexist, but the former reside in monastic, ascetic seclusion within electric fences and wait indignantly at times and with a quintessentially *mortal* sense of foreboding, to be replaced by younger clones. For Houellebecq it seems, technological determinism becomes the equivalent of biological determinism, and as such he seems to render technological discourses indivisible from gerontological ones. His futuristic narratives are characterised by a sporadic sentimentality as his distinctly unfamiliar, apocryphal world, set 1000 years in the future, becomes comfortingly, if also disappointingly, familiar –sending the prefix ‘neo-’ spiralling into increasing irony. The neohumans’ elitist and eugenical, monastic compound seems to

⁸¹⁰ Stelarc, ‘Prosthetics, Robotics, and Remote Existence’, *Leonardo*, vol. 24, No. 5 (1991) pp. 591-595 (p. 593) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1575667> [accessed 20/02/12]

⁸¹¹ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 139.

⁸¹² *Ibid.*, p. 419.

connote anxiety and malaise, and a seclusion and social ostracism likened more to geriatrics than neohumanity 'since it was out of the question that neohumans would venture out of their residence.'⁸¹³ He even describes himself as being 'from now on in unlimited, indefinite stasis.'⁸¹⁴ What distinguishes human from neohuman is not that one ages whilst the other does not, but that ageing for the human is a condition intrinsic to the body, whilst ageing for the neohuman is a malign, arbitrary force that gives neither meaning nor purpose to their lives. Like Beckettian anti-heroes the neohumans simply wait for death. Each neohuman is 'penetrated by death and formatted by it' and, at some point, has to deal with 'the proximity of his Death.'⁸¹⁵ The neohuman undergoes a form of mechanical or cybernetic ageing which is merely the expiry of a 'signal' or 'digital address,'⁸¹⁶ or like any utilitarian object or tool, obsolescence in the face of reinvention. Moreover, the neohumans identify themselves as both more advanced than the humans, but obsolete in relation to the race that will succeed them, known as the Future Ones –if anything, not the glacial constancy of a machine but a very human mutability.

As the narrative progresses it is clear that the only way in which human and neohuman differ is linguistically –the neohuman defined by its futuristic, science-fictional parlance and the human its base, axiomatic social commentary. The neohumans have mechanical bodies but, like humans, are destined to decay and be succeeded by their progeny, or 'offspring': '[w]hen my life ceases, the absence of a signal will be registered in a few nanoseconds; the manufacture of my successor will begin immediately.'⁸¹⁷ Houellebecq opens with a simplistic binary between human and neohuman that he collapses as he likens human mortality and procreation to the objectivity, utility, and expediency of mechanical reproducibility. The

⁸¹³ Ibid., p. 172.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid., p. 372.

⁸¹⁵ Ibid., p. 118.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

⁸¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17

technologisation of life is, like Daniel1's uninspiring vision, fundamentally dysgenic because what is created is 'a society of inert, unengaged breathing corpses that do not enjoy the years of life that stretch out endlessly ahead of them.'⁸¹⁸ It problematises the concept of past and future in the novel, as what opens as an untroubled antithesis between two narratives –one derisive social commentary and the other futuristic, prognosticative utopia –concludes with their uncanny congeniality. The sole feature distinguishing the figures throughout the novel is the *language* of their respective chapters. As such, we might say the neohumans represent less a futurist, transhuman race, and more the ways in which the abject, fatigable body is *elevated* firstly by discourse –whether that of technological and medical progressivism, or more banally anti-ageing –and secondly of the ideas about human ageing and the body one inherits from it. In the narrative of Daniel24, Houellebecq places rhetoric in direct contrast with the reality, and continually reminds us that the prefix 'neo-' is less a statement of distinction or novelty, and more a point of increasing irony in the text. Retaining the prefix even after he debunks all distinction between human and neohuman, Houellebecq invites us to consider this novel a commentary on the triumph of the rhetoric of transcendence over any actual, manifest improvements to humanity brought about by science and technology. The novel is not a eugenical portrait of human evolution but a paradoxically nostalgic one as body modification and human cloning simply create more and more attenuated versions of the same individual. It is linked to the evocation of past (i.e. human maladies), not the creation of the future, and comments on the adequation of technology and immortality not to deathlessness but to old age and a protracted awareness of death. Houellebecq's science fiction offers a sadistic vision of immortality that creates thanatotic desires in its hosts that are exacerbated by the fact that the technology, for whatever reason, precludes their ability to socialise. They are, then, death-obsessed, nomadic figures with a patho-technological or

⁸¹⁸ Jacqueline Dutton, p. 21.

techno-pathological anatomy. Like the prose and dramaturgy of Samuel Beckett, technology is untranscendent, and becomes a metaphor for rather than a solution to the aversiveness and constrictiveness of the ageing body. The structural division that remains in the novel between Daniel1 and Daniel24/5 becomes the vestige of a powerful illusion: the belief in the transformative, infinitising capabilities of new technologies and biochemical interventions. Daniel24's narrative even contains the same eschatological tones of Daniel1's as he writes of how:

[t]he sea has disappeared, and with it the memory of the waves. We possess audio and visual documents; none of them enables us to truly experience the tenacious fascination that gripped man [...] Nor are we able to understand the thrill of the chase, the pursuit of prey; nor religious feeling, nor that kind of immobile, objectless frenzy that man called *mystical ecstasy*.⁸¹⁹

Houellebecq offers an 'inhumane form of immortality'⁸²⁰ which is not just comparable to mortality, but less preferable, and this renders their exaggeratedly primitive portrayal of humans not simply ironic, but indicative of an extreme repressive, even delusional state: 'look at the little creatures moving in the distance; look. They are humans.'⁸²¹ This seems no more than a self-aggrandizing, delusional discourse on a taxonomy –a sense of socio-evolutionary difference that is metaphorised in the split narrative structure –that seems increasingly illusory with each attenuated clone –each one of which suffers 'the disappearance of contact [...] followed by that of desire,'⁸²² and becomes less a transcendent machine and more plaintive human as time progresses. Despite their repudiation of religion

⁸¹⁹ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 32.

⁸²⁰ Jacqueline Dutton, p. 23.

⁸²¹ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 17.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, p. 370.

and religious feelings, in the above quotation, Daniel²⁴ often declares: ‘I believe in the coming of the Future Ones,’⁸²³ which is markedly similar to the prophesised return of Christ to Earth and to the Nicene Creed –the profession of faith in Christian liturgy. This is one sense in which the human/neohuman nexus is strengthened. It is also the case with the nature of their existence, which is defined by electronic perpetuity –by a signal that is transmitted and received –and death as simply the absence of a signal upon which ‘the manufacture of [a] successor will begin immediately.’⁸²⁴ Houellebecq retrofits his ostensibly transhuman figures with the sort of finitude, failure, frustration, ennui, and anxiety that they disparagingly equate with human mortality –despite the claim ‘I would never know boredom, desire or fear to the same extent as a human being.’⁸²⁵ Daniel 24 even describes himself as an ‘improved monkey’⁸²⁶, subject to an existence defined by the same electronic signal and the same memories and idiosyncrasies as his progenitors –an existence that amounts to nothing more than a restrictive repetition of the same patterns, or electronic signals, analogous more to geriatrics than neohumanity: ‘our existence, devoid of passions, had been that of the elderly; we looked on the world with a gaze characterized by lucidity without benevolence.’⁸²⁷ Moreover, as the neohumans have a lack of sensory acuity and kinaesthetic engagement with the world, their bodies represent an impasse –a point of hindrance, as a result of which they have little knowledge of their environment. They are manifestly dysfunctional figures, yet whilst their lack or loss of knowledge implies an amnesic state they also have never *had* that knowledge. This gives them an infantile quality, and concomitantly a different meaning to the prefix ‘neo-’ which seems more representative of *tabula rasa* –the epistemological thesis that we are born bereft of knowledge and experience (colloquially, a ‘blank slate’). Whether their inefficacies are defined as a dysfunctional lack or a natural absence depends on whether they

⁸²³ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸²⁴ Ibid.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., p. 416.

⁸²⁶ Ibid., p. 422

⁸²⁷ Ibid., p. 406.

are considered infantile or senile, possibly even demented figures. As both connote dependence, neither allow for a transcendent representation of technological modification.

Neohumanity is not ‘a work in progress’ as transhumanism envisions; rather, it is a technologised sect that is meditative, sexually neutered, taciturn, and incapable. In his representation of these posthuman figures, Houellebecq includes all the conventional and canonical indices of decline one would expect to find in a traditional, realist narrative of ageing. The neohumans are not in contradistinction to ‘mankind in its weaknesses, its neuroses, its doubts,’⁸²⁸ but a reflection of it and inclined to inertia, enfeeblement, and mild, exhausted indignation. Decay is not lessened, palliated, reversed, or disinvented by technology, but created and sustained by it. For the neohumans, technology correlates with their decline, and in the case of Daniel25, he is at times consumed by the incremental repetitions and variations in human suffering which his ‘inhumane’ immortality condemns him to experience over and over again. We thus hear his existential musings and thanatotic desires as he laments: ‘why was I alive?’⁸²⁹ Commenting on body modification, prostheses, and other substitutive devices, Daniel Dinello writes:

Human bodies will become synthetic. Life will be prolonged and enhanced through cyborgization –body-improving prosthetic technology that will replace deteriorating body parts [...] “The distinction between us and robots is going to disappear”. In fact, many have already become cyborgs –machine-organic fusions –as science currently provides knees, shoulders, arms, elbows, wrists, fingers, and toes.⁸³⁰

Indeed, Houellebecq’s vision of body modification is such that the technological annexations are undifferentiated from the body –undifferentiated to such an extent that the

⁸²⁸ Ibid., p. 154.

⁸²⁹ Ibid., p. 406.

⁸³⁰ Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), p. 19.

technologisation of Man has become indistinguishable from the humanising of the machine. Houellebecq is not making humanity immortal, but making technology mortal. He dissociates technology from futurism and indeed from immortality. Technology, he seems to imply, will not grant a new, alternative paradigm of human development, for technology is itself subject to the same processes we as humans think to differentiate it from: it is created; it is used; it erodes; with each wave of scientific or technological progress it becomes obsolete; and as a consequence of reinvention, it is discarded. He narrates technological systems as fundamentally *biological* formations. Technology, as Houellebecq's narrative suggests, is itself entrenched in the selfsame laws of existence we believe it to cure us of—which is to be 'born, evolve, and die in a totally deterministic manner.'⁸³¹ The technological perversion of the body is, for Houellebecq, a fundamentally eschatological spectacle at times, signifying the thrilling but ultimately threatening permeability and duplicability of the body. Technological modification, it seems, is not a tool with which one can surpass the death-susceptible body; it is the holding up of a mirror to one's own inadequacies, and rehearsing and duplicating one's own lamentable condition across different substrates at once nihilistically and narcissistically. The neohumans are a machine-powered simulacrum of ageing, and what Houellebecq asks us to consider is the notion of technology as a causative agent in ageing and death, and the extent to which technological modification represents a *reversion to nature*. Daniel is the personification of human eugenics, and through the alternation between scabrous hedonist Daniel¹ and enlightened, sleek neohuman clone Daniel²⁴ we are invited into simplistic, binary oppositions. However, the clones of Daniel, insofar as they are also *attenuated* copies of the same person, also form the basis for a parable of ageing. As Daniel evolves, his technological annexations—and eventually his entire body—begin to resemble impediments or obstructions, and paradoxically it is through the themes of

⁸³¹ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 316.

human eugenics, body modification, and immortality that this novel arrives at an uncanny similarity with traditional realist narratives of ageing. Each Daniel is a lesser figure than the preceding Daniel, and is evocative of the different people we become through time and the vicissitudes of age, as described by Edward Bellamy:

...there are half a dozen of each of us, or a dozen if you please, one in fact for each epoch of our life, and each slightly or wholly different from the others. Each one of these epochs is foreign and inconceivable to the others, as ourselves at seventy now are to us [...] So that the different periods of life are to all intents and purposes different persons, and the first person of grammar ought to be used only with reference to the present tense. What we were, or shall be, or do, belongs strictly to the third person [...] The three persons of grammar are really not enough. A fourth is needed to distinguish the ego of the past and future from the present ego which is the only true one.⁸³²

Technology is a demonstrably ambiguous force, representing human transcendence and human dependence, salvation and condemnation. Houellebecq's depiction of neohuman ageing, which conflates organic decay and machinic failure, harks back to earlier representations of technology in terms of the neutrality of the tool subordinated to human control. This perhaps provides a more compelling evocation of the pathos of age, as that sense of subordination –not to the human but to their deterministic universe (i.e. mortality) – is strikingly prevalent. In a similar vein, the neohumans are arguably a personification of mortality and death, inasmuch as technological modification to some extent necessitates the death and highlights threatening permeability of the human. As M.J McNamee and S.D

⁸³² Edward Bellamy, 'The Old Folks' Party' *The Blindman's World and Other Stories* (USA: BiblioLife Publishers, 2009), p. 64.

Edwards describe, technological modification represents ‘if not the death of human nature, then at least its dislocation.’⁸³³ The neohumans age not because their bodies decay or fail, but because they become increasingly obsolete with the design, manufacture, and perfection of technology that must either be integrated within, or wholly replace them. In this Houellebecq’s correlates biological determinism with technofatalism, misanthropy and transhumanity, and both optimistically futuristic and terminally artefactual figures. Despite the separation of a thousand years, then, neohumans are a disjunctive synthesis –at once mortal and immortal, ageless human and senescing machine, geriatric and transhuman. They are neither protean figures, modelled as they are on their progenitors (and consequently their progenitors’ failings and foibles), nor have much capacity for intellectual or emotional development beyond that of their progenitors. They are subordinated to and defined by the glut of memories and experiences that comprised Daniel1’s identity. Their subordination to their predecessor in this way is equivalent to that of the predecessor to his corporal limitations. Whilst in the case of ageing there is an extension of biological language to the neohumans’ electronic systems, the neohumans seem less capable, biologically, than their human counterparts in the sense that they have no intrinsic ability to ameliorate their condition: they simply cease to exist and are immediately replaced. Paradoxically transhumanity represents a form of over-determination in this novel, and this is made evident by the increasing encroachment of the subject of old age and human suffering in what initially reads as a relatively conventional science fiction narrative. Daniel24’s life, moreover, is purely utilitarian and servile; it seems, as he describes himself as ‘maintain[ing] the presence, to make possible the coming of the Future Ones.’⁸³⁴ It implies an evacuation of meaning of one’s own life, and the vacuity that pervades the neohuman existence is

⁸³³ M.J McNamee and S.D Edwards, ‘Transhumanism, Medical Technology and Slippery Slopes, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (Sept., 2006), p. 513, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27719694?seq=1> [accessed 30/08/11].

⁸³⁴ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 57.

represented most acutely and poignantly in Daniel25's awareness of 'twenty thousand days that would be identical'⁸³⁵ –which connotes a boredom and tedium he likens to old age. The selfsame sense of foreboding is also conveyed in Daniel1's narrative as he writes: 'felt myself faced with infinity like a flea on a sheet of flypaper.'⁸³⁶ He writes that there has developed in him 'as in all neohumans, a certain fatalism, linked to an awareness of our own immortality, that brought us closer to the ancient human peoples.'⁸³⁷ Immortality becomes fundamental to his representation of mortality, just as technological discourses –with allusions to dependency, surrogacy, and lack –are indistinguishable from gerontological ones. The neohumans' lack of any sensory or kinaesthetic engagement implies physical deficiency; their lack of any familial or biographic memory implies an amnesic quality; their vague and contrived approximation of sex and sexual pleasure signifies another frustrating insufficiency; and the protracted calvary that constitutes their existence connotes not perpetual youth but perpetual dying. The neohumans' bodies are portrayed as restrictive, aversive, and deficient, and as such the science fictional parlance that remains characteristic of their narratives is rendered increasingly ironic, having at times more in common with a traditional realist narrative of ageing. Technology is not transformative or transcendent; it is a malign external force, instigating deficiency and lack comparable to disability, injury, or senescence. The neohumans are infelicitous and bemoan their physical maladies: 'perhaps I had, in the worst sense of the term, become human.'⁸³⁸

For Houellebecq, modification is synonymous at times with subordination. Daniel24/5 becomes subordinated to technology rather than emancipated by it, and this represents acquiescence to forces beyond his control. In this sense *The Possibility of an Island* seems at times a cautionary narrative, warning not against the technologisation of the body, but against

⁸³⁵ Ibid., p. 422.

⁸³⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

⁸³⁷ Ibid., p. 415.

⁸³⁸ Ibid., p. 405.

the belief in the transformative and infinitising capabilities of new technologies. Technology is not a benign addition for the neohumans, but instead Houellebecq converts the technological adjunct into a metonym for old age, in the same way the walking stick or Zimmer frame might be in a traditional realist narrative of ageing. Towards the novel's conclusion the categories of geriatrics and neohumanity collapse as Daniel²⁵, like Daniel²⁴ and his 'calm and joyless life,'⁸³⁹ is transformed into an abject, fatigable, and nomadic figure not dissimilar to a Beckettian anti-hero. The humanisation of the neohumans is 'here so marked that [it] could easily have been attributed to Daniel¹, our distant ancestor, rather than to one of his neohumans successors.'⁸⁴⁰ The failure of technology to advance humanity socially and, to some extent, physiologically is comparable to the unmodified mortal body's failure to survive. In this sense, Houellebecq's narrative is similar to Bob Shaw's *One Million Tomorrows* (1970) in which immortality is made available through pharmacological treatments, but with the consequence of sterilisation, loss of physical desire and physical ability. It is similar also to Poul Anderson's *The Boat of a Million Years* (1989) where the characters' immortal physiologies do not prevent them from physical trauma and so are rendered conflictually mortal and immortal. Houellebecq does not simply conjoin disparate timeframes on bodily level, but on an historical level as the descriptions of the neohumans' monastic, futuristic compound are suffused, if only subtly, with allusions to comparatively antiquated ideologies and anti-humanistic social regimes. The neohumans are exaggeratedly discriminative and instate a clearly oppressive social hierarchy, referring to humans as 'savages': 'When I kill a savage who, more audacious than others, lingers at the protective fence [...] I have the sensation of accomplishing a necessary and legitimate act.'⁸⁴¹ Their obsessive preoccupation with limiting the human population seems loosely Malthusian, whilst their treatment of humans is evocative of the sort of biological racism constitutive of

⁸³⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 153.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid., p. 55.

Nazi eugenics –within which gerontophobic discourses are woven. This is also the case in their monistic views of human perfection and excellence, and their idolatrous, servile conviction of their own efforts toward the coming of a perfect race –a race termed ‘the Future Ones’ throughout the novel. Houellebecq seeks to destabilise, ironise, and strip the neohumans of their portentous and eugenical ‘neo-’ and collapse the past/future tenses on a jointly bodily and historical level: bodily in the sense that the neohumans are equipped with quintessentially human anxieties about ageing and death; and historically on a socially and ideological level. Despite the neohumans’ retrograde physicality, their self-aggrandisement raises humanistic concerns relating to the threat of social atavism brought by technological advance: ‘What will happen to political rights’ asks Fukuyama ‘once we are able to, in effect, breed some people with saddles on their backs, and others with boots and spurs?’⁸⁴² Rather than a decisively linear, evolutionary strategy, technology within more conventional portrayals of human eugenics are, amongst some trans- and posthumanist thinkers, equated to the reinstatement of comparatively antiquated levels of social and economic inequality. Although such concerns are at times apparent, they remain a chiefly unrealised formation within the text as Houellebecq’s dysgenic portrayal of transhumanity –which here in *The Possibility of an Island* means humanity as a work in progress, an intermediary stage –centres more upon neohumanity as simply a simulacrum of ageing, as biological rather than social atavism. As a consequence of the neohumans’ pathological anatomy, such hierarchies are not manifest in this novel’s physical reality, although the polemic remains with the neohumans’ reference to humans as base animals. Again the neohumans are advanced in rhetoric only which serves to disunify physical capability and linguistic expression, and foreground the disjunctive synthesis that comprises this race: ‘neo-’ and ‘human’. The rhetoric of transcendence and novelty then, although belying their physical constitution, renders the

⁸⁴² Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), pp. 10-11.

neohumans society an artefact. Technology that advances the few and not the many can only reinstate comparatively antiquated social and pecuniary inequalities and oppressive, discriminative ideologies. M.J McNamee and S.D Edwards write that ‘the human may be incapable of breeding with the posthuman and will be seen as having a much lower moral standing [...]critics may argue that transhumanism will increase inequalities between the rich and poor.’⁸⁴³ With technological modification, then, antiquity and futurity collide, and this occurs in *The Possibility of an Island* certainly on the level of discourse, and renders them atavistic as much physiologically as socio-politically. The neohumans’ elitism is all but evident in their depiction of the humans as base, animalistic, Neanderthal figures, and this social stratification evokes a scene analogous to Dieter Birnbacher’s description of the posthuman, who is ‘related to humans in a way similar to how humans are related to non-human animals now.’⁸⁴⁴

The Epilogue is as ambivalent as the main body of the novel. It represents a reversion to nature, although it is unclear whether the concluding scenes are pre-technological or post-biological. The Epilogue connotes a peaceful, benign reconciliation of the split narrative and sense of equality, and ideologically seems comparable to Romantic primitivism and perhaps a typically Blakean innocence:

[W]hat I wanted to do was to continue to travel with Fox across the prairies and mountains, to experience the awakenings, the baths in a freezing river, the minutes spent drying in the sun, the evenings spent around the fire in the starlight. I had attained innocence, in an absolute and non-conflictual state, I no longer had any plan,

⁸⁴³ M.J McNamee and S.D Edwards, p. 514.

⁸⁴⁴ Dieter Birnbacher, ‘Posthumanity, Transhumanism and Human Nature’ in *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity* ed. by Ruth Chadwick and Bert Gordijn (Springer, 2008), p. 96.

nor any objective, and my individuality dissolved into an indefinite series of days; I was happy.⁸⁴⁵

On reading the Epilogue, one may recall less the science fictional foundation of this novel and more a humanistic primitivism similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's heuristic examination of human nature and human society in *The Social Contract* (1762) and his thesis of natural goodness. Daniel25 discusses:

the resurgence [...] of the beliefs and behaviours from the most ancient folkloric past of Western mankind, such as astrology, divining magic, and fidelity to hierarchies of a dynastic type. Reconstitution of rural or urban tribes, reappearance of barbarian cults and customs [...] A violent, savage future was what awaited men.⁸⁴⁶

The epilogue depicts 'rediscovering the atavisms'⁸⁴⁷ of their predecessors, and a symbolic convergence of primitivism and transhumanism, antiquity and futurity. Daniel25 reconciles himself to a more natural existence, yet as aforementioned it is not clear whether this depicts a pre-technological or post-biological naturalness. The scene may convey luddism, in the rejection of the technological and the reversion to a natural, salvatory primitivism.

Conversely, it may signify the opposite as the technological has ceased to be the neutral tool and has entered into the order of the natural undifferentiated prosthesis, integrated not by some violent penetrative act but as if by osmosis: 'technology in effect disappears [...] the human becomes technology.'⁸⁴⁸ Houellebecq renders this concluding scene characteristically ambivalent as images of futurism and are conflated with those of Romantic primitivism.

Houellebecq does not simply reconcile human and neohuman, social commentary and science

⁸⁴⁵ Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 392.

⁸⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

⁸⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁸⁴⁸ Eugene Thacker, 'Data Made Flesh: Biotechnology and the Discourse of the Posthuman', *Cultural Critique* No. 53., posthumanism (Winter 2003), University of Minnesota Press, p. 78.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354625> [accessed 31/08/11]

fiction, but makes them equivalent –the one reflecting the other. William Gibson remarked in an interview with CNN: ‘I actually feel that science fiction's best use today is the exploration of contemporary reality [...] Earth is the alien planet now.’⁸⁴⁹ Indeed this is at the core of Houellebecq’s novel as he constructs a quintessentially science fictional narrative in some senses, yet one that neither evades, suppresses, or offers a way out of the pathos of ageing. It is paradigmatic, perhaps, of the west’s own paradox, being as it is a culture that is *ageing* and a culture that is habituated to and defined by discourses of *anti-ageing*. Houellebecq’s novel, often transcendent but also often falling into banality, conflates the categories of social realism and science fiction. One might readily class this novel a product of a society that dealing with rising life expectancies and attendant increases in age-related pathologies, but through the lens of an ideology that is itself set *above* or *beyond* those conditions. One of the enduring messages of Houellebecq’s novel is that irrespective of the formative role of science, medicine, and technology over the body, its limitations and potentialities, ageing and old age persists. The only real ‘elevating’ force in the novel is in the rhetoric of immortality: the neohumans are advanced by virtue not of technological modification, which seems more of an impediment, but of the only real addition: the combining form and increasingly dubious ‘neo-’. In the narratives of Daniels²⁴ and 25, the science fictional parlance remains strongly entrenched in what is, at times, a comparatively banal commentary on their physical infelicities. In this conflictingly futuristic and nostalgic, transcendental and banal evocation, we are presented with a tentatively positive image: a portmanteau figure, combining the virtues of humankind (which includes ageing and mortality) and a vernacular suffused with utopian promises and hopes of transcendence.

Margaret Atwood’s post-apocalyptic fiction *Oryx and Crake* represents a comparable collapse of binaries to Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island*: the atavistic and the

⁸⁴⁹ William Gibson quoted by John Hamilton, ‘The Future of Science Fiction’ in *Modern Masters of Science Fiction: The World of Science Fiction* (USA: ABDO Publishing Company, 2007), p. 28.

futuristic, commercial exploitation and non-corporal afterlife, the natural and the contrived, spiritualism and secularism, the primitive, death-susceptible body and the ageless, post-carbon, post-bodied figures known as the Children of Crake. The novel is about hubris, and focuses on the over-zealous scientist, Crake –a post-apocalyptic incarnation of Dr Frankenstein –and Snowman’s attempt to come to terms with the world he has created. The world is a biotech corporate oligarchy, with all power resting with the scientific elite within gated communities. It is a pastiche dystopia, a futuristic evocation of epochal-global trends such as economic globalisation, postmodernism in culture, immigration and multiculturalism, the digitalisation of communications, climate change and global warning, and the west’s current trends toward secularism, individualism, commercial exploitation, and incredulity toward mortality and the laws of nature. Nature is brutalised, recreated, and commodified in this novel, and consequently the most memorable aspect of this text is its surfeit of neologisms and ersatz creatures. *Oryx and Crake* is ‘an imaginative writer’s response to contemporary situations of cultural crisis as they suppose what *may* happen.’⁸⁵⁰ The novel explores developments in science and technology such as xenotransplantation, genetic engineering, and the creation of transgenic animals. In this novel the:

...creation of a new humanoid species serves as the solution to the intractable crisis posed by an infernal constellation of unsolvable problems: unchecked capitalism, catastrophic climate change, the depletion of natural resources, and a hedonistic society that categorically rejects any limits on individual pleasure.⁸⁵¹

She condemns the dehumanizing effects of technological advance, which she envisions as an extreme commercialization and commodification of life –similar to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave*

⁸⁵⁰ Coral Ann Howells, ‘Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 161.

⁸⁵¹ Peter Yoonsuk Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 119.

New World (1932), *Mortality Inc.*, and in part Larry Niven's *A World out of Time* (1976) in which people are brought back to life, used as commodities and, under the control of a totalitarian state, used to colonise and terraform other planets.

Atwood's text is rife with temporal ambivalence. Her ambivalent treatment of time is represented stylistically, in her non-linear narrative structure: 'it begins in the middle of events, we go back in time to find out how we got to that mid-point and then we go forward in time to find out what the protagonist will do next.'⁸⁵² It is also represented historically, in her conflicted depiction of a retrofitted future and the jointly nostalgic and prognosticative imagery. Her depiction of a world at once technologically advanced and post-apocalyptic evokes images of a futuristic, post-religious technocracy working towards curing the mortal limitations of disease, ageing, and death; yet it is also a scabrous, post-war dystopia – a terminally historical scene controlled by a genocidal autocrat not dissimilar to Adolf Hitler and brought to this state through the unsettling deification of the scientist, Crake. It is, then, an advanced society, but also a nostalgic evocation of the past, with the concept of hubris all too clear throughout the text. The message of the novel is: render human nature irreducibly malleable and permeable, and the consequences, which for Atwood seem to be pure and simple entropy, will return humanity to a primitivism that is characteristic of a much earlier point in evolutionary history:

fiddle about with humanity as you will and modify genes as you hope to, ultimately human nature is so irreducibly bouncy and it will return and human beings will return to their traditions and their rituals and will reinvent those things that make them distinctive and recognisably to us human.⁸⁵³

⁸⁵² Margaret Atwood, 'Oryx and Crake Revealed', The Abramowitz Lecture Series, *Arts at MIT*, MIT 04/04/2004, 10:30, <http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/196/> [accessed 10/08/11].

⁸⁵³ Michael Gove, *Newsnight Review*, BBC News (6th May 2003) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/review/3003883.stm> [accessed 01/09/11]

There is an element of Atwood's futurism, then, that is always overshadowed by the past, which constitutes both a retrospective allusion and, conflictingly, a threatening prospection. This chronological ambiguity is matched by Atwood's representation of *physical* age in the *Children of Crake*,⁸⁵⁴ for whom youth and senescence are correlated states. The novel opens with a character known as Snowman looking at his watch: 'it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is.'⁸⁵⁵ The expulsion of 'official time' is as much an indication of historical as physiological time. The synthetic seems to govern Atwood's visual lexicon of ageing, as she represents the body as having the same inherently restorative potential as an object. She implicitly rejects any deterministic conceptions of old age through this, viewing the pathological anatomy of the human body as a recuperable condition (e.g. 'NooSkins for Olds' and the 'neuro-regeneration project'⁸⁵⁶) in a manner not dissimilar to etiological discourses of ageing in Classical Greek and Roman medical/proverbial texts.⁸⁵⁷ Atwood's visions for human improvement are monistic, bringing bodies, machines, and commodity-capitalism into commerce with one another towards the amelioration of the species and the disinvention of age. In Atwood's commoditocracy, within which the subject of ageing is presented, cosmetic and biochemical interventions are not treatments that are performed *on* or done *to* the body. Instead, they colonise the body's invisible, visceral depths, and ablation and cosmetic repair occur microscopically. The cosmetic work then perpetuates itself as if by mitosis and anti-ageing constitutes not a cultural contrivance but a fully integrated phenomenon performing at a quasi-biological level:

⁸⁵⁴ Hereafter referred to as 'The Children' for brevity.

⁸⁵⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p. 3.

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-3.

⁸⁵⁷ See introduction to thesis.

a method of replacing the older epidermis with a fresh one, but not a laser-thinner or dermabraded short-term resurfacing but a genuine start-over skin that would be wrinkle- and blemish free. For that, it would be useful to grow a young, plump skin cell that would eat up the worst cells in the skins of those on whom it was planted and replace them with replicas of itself, *like algae growing on a pond* [my italics].⁸⁵⁸

Here Atwood portrays an image of the non-neutrality of technology –what above is defined as ‘skin-related biotechnologies’⁸⁵⁹ –where the technological acts as an undifferentiated intervention colluding, as if it were an intelligence or a life form, with the disappointingly familiar ideas about ageing. Although Atwood has classed this novel ‘speculative’ fiction in many interviews, for those familiar with current pharmacological, cosmetic or ablative laser resurfacing procedures,⁸⁶⁰ *Oryx and Crake* is a novel that emerges out of hegemonic rhetoric of immortality that defines 20th and 21st century consumer society. It is a tragicomic pastiche of prolongevity strategies and the commodification of immortality, with ‘Operation Immortality’ and the Fountain of Youth Total Plunge which ‘rasp[s] off your entire epidermis.’⁸⁶¹ Immortality in the novel forms at once a speculative, fantastical projection and a disappointingly familiar (and nostalgic) commercial contrivance aimed at the ‘well-to-do and once-young, once-beautiful woman or man, cranked up on hormonal supplements and shot full of vitamins but hampered by the unforgiving mirror.’⁸⁶² The absence of ‘official time’ in the novel, then, depends to some extent on the reader’s knowledge of prolongevity strategies and cosmetic treatments, which will either render the novel prognosticative and

⁸⁵⁸ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 62.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁰ Astrid Stuckelberger, *Anti-ageing Medicine*, pp. 144 & 147.

⁸⁶¹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 25 & 205.

⁸⁶² Ibid., p. 62.

futuristic or artefactual –or as reviewers comment: ‘a near future that is both all too familiar and beyond our imagining.’⁸⁶³

The Children of Crake remain pre-pubertal throughout their lives. Their bodies quite simply do not function as signifiers of time passed, as middle age and senescence remain resolutely defined in terms of youth: ‘no ripples of fat around their waists, no bulges, no dimpled orange-skin cellulite on their thighs. No body hair, no bushiness. They look like retouched fashion photos.’⁸⁶⁴ Because of their doctored growth cycles, their physical appearance represents both protracted time and instantaneity, as a result of which infancy and adolescence are equated: ‘the yearling looks like a five-year-old. By the age of four he’ll be an adolescent.’⁸⁶⁵ This is similar indeed to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* in which the advantages for manufacturing ‘age’ through reproductive technology are frequently deliberated:

...if they could discover a technique for shortening the period of maturation, what a triumph, what a benefaction to Society! “Consider the horse.” They considered it. Mature at six; the elephant at ten. While at thirteen a man is not yet sexually mature [...] Long years of superfluous and wasted immaturity. If the physical development could be speeded up till it was as quick, say, as a cow’s, what an enormous saving to the Community!⁸⁶⁶

The Children are ‘like animated statues,’⁸⁶⁷ both organic and synthetic, mortal and immortal: ‘...“they’re programmed to drop dead at age thirty –suddenly, without getting sick. No old age, none of those anxieties.”’⁸⁶⁸ Atwood’s novel confronts the issue of how to represent age

⁸⁶³ Unknown, http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/46756.Oryx_and_Crake [accessed 09/2011]

⁸⁶⁴ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 115.

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁸⁶⁶ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 11-12.

⁸⁶⁷ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 187.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

when and if medicine is able to give us bodies divested of the signs of ageing. The Children, like Houellebecq's neohumans, are portmanteau figures, with the virtues of youth yet bestowed with a normal lifespan without the protracted boredom and frustrations of immortality, as represented in *The Possibility of an Island*. They are both ageing and ageless, or as Crake suggests, mortal and immortal: '[i]f you take "mortality" as being, not death, but the foreknowledge of it and the fear of it, then "immortality" is the absence of such fear. Babies are immortal. Edit out the fear, and you'll be...'.⁸⁶⁹ They are immortal not because they do not age or die, but because they have no knowledge of those concepts. Immortality, then, is a state of ignorance (or repression), not infinity; it is a psychological not chronological phenomenon, and so what the Children signify is the coexistence of youth and old age, agelessness and agedness. As long as we have this cosmetic simulacral youth, we are all immortal; thus Atwood ostensibly retrofits her speculative vision by rendering immortality only a superficially realised condition analogous to that which consumers and patients can achieve under contemporary capitalism and medical epistemologies. Whilst Houellebecq's figures populate a world ambiguously futuristic and banal, natural and crafted, and where ageing is constitutive of both organic decay and machinic failure, Atwood's Children of Crake seem to be immortal and mortal, inhumed within a futuristic, sterilised technocratic compound and a contemporary capitalist commoditocracy. The two worlds, like Houellebecq's categories of human and neohuman, are interchangeable –symmetrical even. Her polemic centres upon the notion that we become immortal not necessarily when medicine and technology can defer or cure us of the death-susceptible body, but when its promises of reversibility and correctability lessen the fear of death, and when the cosmetic illusions of youth, health, and vitality help repress awareness of the ageing process. Immortality is not contingent on actual, manifest changes in life-expectancy brought about by medical and

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid.

technological advance, but the appeasement of mortal fears and the affirmation of that through the cosmetic deception. Immortality is a state which falls into banality with this view of perpetual youth as not the emancipation from an implacable reality but the simple repression of it. On this basis this novel can be considered as much speculative fiction as social realism, and therefore at once prognosticative and nostalgic.

Suggesting science fiction is fissured between the empirical and the imaginative, the present and the future, is by no means a new or contentious argument –science fiction often serves as social commentary, or in this case a pastiche of prolongevity medicine and promises of sempiternity in consumer society. What might be suggested of *Oryx and Crake* is that Atwood alludes to such divisions and uses this aspect of science fiction self-consciously as a metaphor for a similarly fissured mature identity in contemporary anti-ageing culture.

Atwood compounds the ambivalence that characterises the Children's biological age by situating them trans-historically. The Children are our post-carbon, posthuman future, with all vestiges of age disinvented at a whim; but they are also artefacts, signifiers of our literary past. They have a naive, Wordsworthian childlike innocence, and just as we question the physical age of the children and even the literary genre to which they belong –science fiction or social realism –so too do we question whether they are a part of Atwood's speculative futurist visions, or a nostalgic glance back to conditions and ideologies associated more with the literary Romanticism. It is an ambivalence compounded in her representation of the hermit protagonist, known only as Snowman, with which this novel opens. Snowman signifies the literary/historical past: the good or noble savage, the idealized indigene of a more primitive, pre-technological world. He is an anachronism in this novel, and this primitivism represented –as well as the clandestine intertextual references –form part of Atwood's representation of hubris in this novel. The tree-dwelling Neanderthal figure of Snowman represents natural goodness and Romantic primitivism, as well as the sort of anti-

corporate themes that Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984* were renowned for. Snowman signifies the past, then, and the Children of Crake even recognise him as a very distant ancestor, acting as a reminder of the past –of 'what they [the Children] may have been once [...] *your ancestor, come from the land of the dead*'⁸⁷⁰ with 'grimy, bug-bitten skin, the salt-and-pepper tufts of hair, the thick yellow toenails.'⁸⁷¹ His pseudonym 'Snowman' is similarly paradoxical and may, on Atwood's part, function as a subtle declaration of this ambivalence. 'Snowman' may refer to an Abominable snowman, a being or animal existing and not existing; it also refers to a snowman: that is, 'the white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow'⁸⁷² and a metaphor for the *finitude*, but also the *fluidity* of the human form. This combines to create a jointly transhumanist and nihilistic spectacle –the creation of human form correlated with the destruction of human form. The protagonist's nominally 'transhuman' nature is conflated with allusions to primitivism and goodness akin to some of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophies expounded in *The Social Contract* –his benign nature combined with his primitive appearance. As a result of his disengagement and jointly monastic and animalistic seclusion, the Children fear his perceived 'monstrousness,'⁸⁷³ and even accumulate a 'stock of lore, of conjecture'⁸⁷⁴ about him –to the point where he is mythologised into 'a separate order of being.'⁸⁷⁵ However, inasmuch as 'Snowman' also connotes more typically transhumanist conceptions of the human form as fluid –as a work in progress –this aforementioned primitivism is hauled by Atwood back into futurity. The character can, then, be read as both a novel and nostalgic figure, in the same way youth and senescence, science fiction and realist neutrality seem putatively equivalent states in the Children. As if to emphasise this, despite his obviously incongruent appearance

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁸⁷² Ibid., p. 263.

⁸⁷³ Ibid., p. 116.

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

in a science fiction novel he even becomes an unwitting participant and devotee of the very personification of the future he, ostensibly, is not a part of: the Children of Crake. He finds himself an accidental advocate of Crake's morally dubious effort to create a race of perpetually young ersatz humanoids and animals from which to grow extra organs. He is required to oversee, or rather parent, this superior yet ironically subservient race with 'built-in insect repellent, altered digestive systems so that they can eat grass and leaves, a self-healing mechanism'⁸⁷⁶ designed to succeed humans –in other words, *him*. Not only is he simultaneously superior to them in his parental role, but biologically he is inferior to them. Like the Children who exist in parenthesis, between mortality and immortality, the transcendent and the banal, Snowman is astride the primitive on the one side –in his primordial and arboreal nature –and the futurist on the other in his (albeit unwitting) perpetuation of Crake's work.

Many of Atwood's characters, then, are highly ambiguous, and this is matched by what appears, at times, in the novel to be a pastiche of earlier (literary-)historical periods. She presents not a linear but recapitulative relation between youth and old age and, by extension, an isomorphic relation between organic subject and synthetic object or commodity. Like an object or commodity that can be brought back to its former condition through restoration, so too can the individual subject be returned to a 'once-young, once-beautiful woman or man.'⁸⁷⁷ Unlike her previous allusions to an insubstantial cosmetic deception, what seems analogous to the commodification of youth in discourses of consumerism becomes more akin to time travel: 'why chain your body to the clock, you can break the shackles of time.'⁸⁷⁸ The nihilating effect of time on the body is presented almost as an arbitrary, malign force. As Peter Yoonsuk Paik comments:

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 312.

technology that enables modern societies to diminish steadily the vulnerability and exposure of human beings to the condition of mortality produces the unintended consequence that human beings then come to regard suffering itself as unnatural.⁸⁷⁹

This process of auto-/self-restoration transforms humans into the ultimate site of perfectibility and customization –which in the novel is done through the breeding of transgenic, or hybrid, creatures such as ‘pigoons’ used to ‘grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs.’⁸⁸⁰ Because the novel moves between past, present, and future non-linearly –and because each chapter is written in the present-tense –it is often ambiguous as to which narrative fragments are speculative projections and which are retrospective. Similarly, as we read about Snowman’s past (when he is known as Jimmy), we are confronted with an unsettling blend of past and future. For instance, it is a tendency of Atwood’s to convey a mundane, domestic scene written in the past tense –a scene we identify as Snowman’s youth –and then to pull back to reveal the alien, dystopian ‘future’. This is evident in the disturbing, but seamless, shift seen in the following passage:

Jimmy’s earliest complete memory was of a huge bonfire [...] He was wearing red rubber boots with a smiling duck’s face on each toe; he remembers that, because after seeing the bonfire he had to walk through a pan of disinfectant in those boots.⁸⁸¹

In this chapter entitled ‘Bonfire’, as Atwood moves out from describing domestic scenes with Jimmy’s family to their broader environment, what is assumedly a benign middle-class suburbia becomes a sterilized, cloistered futuristic compound of OrganInc, partitioned off from the citified world known as the ‘pleebands’: ‘endless billboards and neon signs and stretches of buildings, tall and short, endless dingy-looking streets, countless vehicles of all

⁸⁷⁹ Peter Yoonsuk Paik, p. *From Utopia to Apocalypse*, p. 118.

⁸⁸⁰ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 25

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

kinds.⁸⁸² Atwood recurrently plays with our idea of historical time in *Oryx and Crake*, often suspending an illusion of the past before transforming it seamlessly into a futurist, technocratic, oligarchical society of OrganInc where, similar to *Brave New World*, all power rests with the scientific elite. The scenes of socio-economic inequalities are necessitated by technology, and so scientific and technological progressivism which defines ‘the future’ actually bring it closer to being more of an historical artefact. As alluded to briefly alongside *The Possibility of an Island*, technological modification necessitates a species split: the human versus the posthuman (in this case the Children of Crake). This is clearly conveyed in the juxtaposition of prognostication with the Romantic primitivism of *Snowman*, and is also represented spatially in the *Pleebands* and *OrganInc*. As McNamee and Edwards comment ‘the human may be incapable of breeding with the posthuman and will be seen as having a much lower moral standing [...] In the same vein, critics may argue that transhumanism will increase inequalities between the rich and poor.’⁸⁸³ From the non-corporal immortality to dystopian techno-fatalism, Dinello constructs a similar argument. He describes an elevation where ‘ordinary humans will be treated as servants or pets and will eventually become extinct’ unless elevated –or ‘resurrected’ –by technology.⁸⁸⁴ This largely typifies the relationship between *Snowman* and *Crake* (and his creations), and so whilst the clear division in some sense offers an untroubled portrayal of human eugenics, it is also its own antithesis, socially and politically, as it also reinstates antiquated social stratifications (to the moralistic indignation of *Snowman*), *not* the post-capitalist, age-and disease-free techno-utopia one might conventionally expect. Body modification evokes a neo-Darwinism, with natural selection is rebranded as technological selection as people wait for ‘robots [to] resurrect selected earthly humans as divine disembodied post-humans –immortal, telepathic,

⁸⁸² Ibid., p. 31.

⁸⁸³ M.J McNamee and S.D Edwards, ‘Transhumanism, Medical Technology and Slippery Slopes’, p. 514

⁸⁸⁴ Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia!*, p. 18.

omniscient, and omnipresent.⁸⁸⁵ In *Oryx and Crake*, technological modification is characterised by a conflictingly primitive resurgence of ‘survival of the fittest’. Like Houellebecq’s neohumans, although the technological is associated with elitism and deification, it also represents an over-determinism that is equal to, if even more oppressive than, biological determinism in humans. The two timeframes, and indeed the two species, form a parallel therefore, not a disjunction as one might initially expect. What is represented, then, is the modified body of the future as a signifier of the past –not the ‘creation of a new social order’⁸⁸⁶ but instead a protraction of human suffering and inequalities, an ‘ongoing critique of what it means to be human.’⁸⁸⁷ As Mark Lawson comments, there is in this science fiction ‘a deep nostalgia, it’s very much more about the past,’⁸⁸⁸ yet this past and this historicity is couched within the expressions and locutions of a posthuman future.

Atwood’s increasingly dubious utopia is characterised by continual allusions to loss, and this is the case in attention paid to names and naming: ‘It was one of Crake’s rules that no name could be chosen for which a physical equivalent –even stuffed, even skeletal –could not be demonstrated.’⁸⁸⁹ For example, roaming about the novel, we find various transgenic animals, such as the ‘spoot/gider’, ‘wolvogs’ (dogs with the ferocity of wolves), ‘ratunks’ (raccoon-skunk hybrids), and ‘pigoons’ (pigs with bodies shaped as balloons used to produce extra organs for human transplantation). These creatures and the corresponding neologisms are emblematic of novelty, of ‘the future’. However, like many aspects of this novel Atwood undermines this representation inasmuch as these transgenic creatures are more signifiers of transience (i.e. the extinction of dogs, raccoons, skunks, pigs, and so on), which is a very

⁸⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁶ Tiziana Terranova, ‘Posthuman Unbounded: Artificial Evolution and High-Tech Subcultures’ in *FutureNatural: Natures, Science, Culture*, ed. by George Robertson et al., (London: Routledge, 1996), cited by Bart Simon in ‘Toward a Critique of Posthuman Futures’, p. 2.

⁸⁸⁷ Bart Simon, ‘Introduction: Towards a Critique of Posthuman Futures’ in *Cultural Critique*, No. 53, Posthumanism (Winter 2003), p. 8 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354621> [accessed 01/09/11]

⁸⁸⁸ Mark Lawson, ‘Oryx and Crake’, *Newsnight Review* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/review/3003883.stm> [accessed 01/09/11]

⁸⁸⁹ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 8.

human preoccupation, than survivability. Moreover, the volatile nature of wolvogs in particular, transforms Snowman, Crake, and the Children of Crake into prey, undermining their supremacy and most notably of all Crake's creation and ultimate Godlike control over these creatures. So whilst these animals are metaphors for the future, they also invert the anthropocentrism that has elevated Man above animals. Again Atwood retrofits futurity with primitive and anachronistic associations, and paradoxically uses signifiers of the future – transgenic creatures – to forge allusions to a much earlier point in evolutionary history. Running parallel to this is Snowman's loss of verbal dexterity as he struggles to retrieve lost words and understand their meaning:

From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can't reach the word. He can't attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space.⁸⁹⁰

The word he cannot retrieve, *Mesozoic*, refers to an age where most dinosaurs developed and became extinct, which has obvious significance in the cautionary anti-corporate, anti-globalisation themes in *Oryx and Crake*. Along with the decline of substance in the transgenic creatures and the ostensibly tenseless, trans-historical characters, Atwood comments in the novel that 'language itself had lost its solidity; it had become thin, contingent, slippery, a viscid form on which he was sliding around.'⁸⁹¹ Frequently in the novel, apparently unassignable words appear to Snowman, 'rag ends of language are floating in his mead: *mephitic, metronome, mastitis, metatarsal, maudlin* [...] Fragments of words are swirling down it, in a grey liquid he realizes in his dissolving brain.'⁸⁹² The transformative capabilities of technology have much more eschatological connotations, not only in the sense

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

⁸⁹¹ Ibid., p. 305.

⁸⁹² Ibid., p. 174.

that it is bound up with the end of language, but that the creation of neologisms arise out of the extinction of various species. As such linguistic novelty and experimentalism to some extent foregrounds the frailty and immanent, if not fully realised, death that underscores human –and animal –nature in the hegemonic presence of technology. Within the text, then, is the occasional word or phraseology that is novel and points, perhaps, towards a utopian future; yet these words and phraseologies and neologisms form the basis of the scattergun nihilism that eventually prevails in the text. As a cautionary novel it alludes to but ultimately seeks distinction from the future, the terminal condition of language and humans/animals alike, which it depicts.

The scenes Atwood creates are apocryphal yet also reified within our own culture, apocalyptic and destructive yet with allusions to creativity and fecundity. Crake scientises every aspect of humanity, and the work of Crake –the creation of people and animals –and the gravitas, elusiveness, and omniscience that increasingly define ‘Crake’ transform him from an individual human scientist into a monotheistic religion. Crake is a godlike figure and, seemingly, a religion. Paradoxically, Crake’s work is sacrilegious and anti-humanistic, yet it is also the affirmation of spiritual belief and, if not godlike, then representing the prophesied return of Christ in the sense that he is a spiritual, salvational, benevolent force –even if that spiritualism, salvation, and benevolence is sprung from scientism and the destruction of humanity. Atwood’s futurism, like Houellebecq’s novel, often seems couched within banalities of everyday existence, and even seems to be at times a parodic evocation of western anti-ageing discourses:

She was getting little creases on either side of her mouth, despite the collagen injections; her biological clock was ticking, as she was fond of pointing out. Pretty soon it would be the NooSkins BeauToxique Treatment for her –Wrinkles Paralyzed

Forever, Employees Half-Price –plus, in say five years, the Fountain of Youth Total Plunge, which rasped off your entire epidermis.⁸⁹³

Allusions to Crake's sacrilegious creative acts are matched by the efforts of individual consumers in wanting to be 'unique, self-created and self-sufficient,'⁸⁹⁴ which is specifically the case for ageing. This likens anti-ageing to a form of laissez-faire individualism, which Atwood exaggerates very satirically as consumers are elevated into messianic figures. Whether banal or transcendent figures, secular or religious, old or young, we get this sense upon reading Atwood's novel that language has lost its solidity in representing age and time – historically and biologically. It is a contingent form on which her ostensibly tenseless, de-chronologised, or chrono-displaced characters slide around, signifying one thing then the next. Historical figures such as Napoleon and Einstein appear sporadically, as does Simone de Beauvoir who of course has written extensively on old age. This novel is replete with anachronisms and intertextual references which problematise this novel's otherwise relatively conventional and unremarkable futurism. They comprise 'zero hour', i.e. the inability to distinguish nostalgia and futurity, comparable to what many sociologists term the 'generational blur'⁸⁹⁵ –as invoked by anti-ageing products, ideologies, and discourses. Whilst Atwood does comment ethically and politically on technology and our growing ontological allegiance to it, these issues are used more as vehicles from which to address representational problems when the body no longer works as a signifier of time passed. She has, after all, given us *The Children of Crake*, whose bodies, divested of all conventional signifiers of old age mean that they can be of any age. Alongside this we have a non-linear and trans-historical narrative with images and allusions that do not signify temporally, or do so ambiguously. What I suggest of this novel then is that there is a jointly bodily and

⁸⁹³ Ibid., p. 205

⁸⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 206.

⁸⁹⁵ Quoted by Toni M. Calasanti & Kathleen F. Slevin in *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging*, p. 53.

representational sense of atemporality, which brings to the fore possible connections that can be made between body and narrative in the context of anti-ageing.

iii) Conclusion

Both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Possibility of an Island* are novels resistant to periodisation. Atwood and Houellebecq subtly conflate antiquity and futurity, geriatrics and posthumanity, mortality and immortality, gerontological and technological discourses. Both novels reflect the cultural antinomies within which the subjects of age and age-transcendence are besieged. Ostensibly, the novels are built upon self-doubting, and attenuated science-fictionalities – prognosticative in some senses, but replete with allusions to the past (or present, depending on your perspective). As such Houellebecq and Atwood render the novels themselves paradigmatic of their similarly conflicted characters whose physiologies are a futuristic but, beset with atavisms, are not only immortal but recognisably and disappointingly mortal. Both novels ask the reader to question the on-going cultural function of science fiction in the context of a population already incredulous of mortality, habituated to ideas of perpetual youth and expectant of their reification. With the futuristic milieu combined with their semiotics of realism, both writers seem incredulous of the very future they depict, and give a sense of science fiction's on-going cultural function. To some extent this seems a very apt reflection of the west's discourses of immortality, which, although still contrary to our empirical environment, provide an element of realism given their dominance in consumer capitalism and the medical episteme, past and present, and the stoical reassertion in an ageing society of 'a continuing "un-ageing" self.'⁸⁹⁶ Betwixt and between fantasy and reality,

⁸⁹⁶ Janine L. Wiles et al., 'Embodied Ageing in Place: What Does it Mean to Grow Old?' in *Towards Enabling Geographies: 'Disabled' Bodies and Minds in Society and Space*, ed. by Vera Chouinard et al. (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2010), pp. 217-37 (p. 229).

novelty and cultural cliché, oneiric self-overcoming and meliorist efforts to restore public health, ideas of immortality and agelessness are highly conflicted. The transhistoricism of Atwood and Houellebecq's novels, combined with the bathetic transcendentalism of the characters' jointly mortal and immortal bodies, seems to embody this. In using science fiction and the themes of immortality and body modification to address or allude to mortality, organic decay, and death, these novels seem to be drawing on the cultural paradoxes of a society at once ageing and anti-ageing: a society replete with age-consciousness, age prejudice, gerontophobia, and demographic and existential alarmism, but a society that is in part adroitly evading the biomedical realities of senescence—a society satiated with the positive cultural mythology that ageing is a time where individuals should be 'healthy, sexually active, engaged, productive and self-reliant.'⁸⁹⁷ These novels' conflicted and ambiguous semiologies of age (both historical and bodily) might be argued to reflect many of the antinomies of contemporary anti-ageing culture, whilst their apparent attenuated, self-doubting science-fictionality seems indicative of a narrator coming to terms with the fragile tenure of this Gnostic genre. As life expectancies continue to rise, science fiction is tacitly embroiled in its adroit evasion, emerging with egalitarian fervour as a new prescriptive literature; and as immortality and alternative, nonlinear conceptions of time gain prominence as a mainstream cultural discourse and paradigm of ageing novels such as *The Possibility of an Island* and *Oryx and Crake* emerge increasingly, it seems, as allegories of postmodern ageing.

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 230.

CONCLUSION: INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

Is it not evident that no signifier, whatever its substance and form, has a “unique and singular reality?” A signifier is from the very beginning the possibility of its own repetition, of its own image or resemblance. It is the condition of its ideality, what identifies it as signifier, and makes it function as such, relating it to a signified which, for the same reasons, could never be a “unique and singular reality”. From the moment that the sign appears, that is to say from the very beginning, there is no chance of encountering anywhere the purity of “reality,” “unicity,” “singularity.”⁸⁹⁸

What I have attempted to show in each chapter of this thesis is that a sense or suggestion of agelessness, perhaps even immortality, inheres within the semiology of age in contemporary Anglophone literature. The spectacle of decrepitude and decline clearly dominates the superficialities of a great deal of contemporary literature, from the ascetic literary formalism of Samuel Beckett and B.S. Johnson’s typographically demented rendering of thought and consciousness, to the flourishing of the Alzheimer’s sub-genre in post-2000 fiction. However, analysis of the formal, structural, and semantic properties reveals that old age has, at the same time, fallen into repression and sublimation, has been placed *sous rature*, or under erasure, by the contingency and irreducibility of the ‘signs’ of ageing –the constant slippage of meaning, that is, at the semiotic level. What I have asked in this thesis is how literary discourse, with its recourse to metaphor, indeterminacy, and its ‘substitutive voyage of signs,’⁸⁹⁹ impacts the representation of old age. I have argued that in a number of modern and contemporary age narratives there is a latent semiotic equivalence between ‘aged’ and ‘ageless’ –that although the thematic content of this literature focuses unproblematically upon senility and decay, the

⁸⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 91.

⁸⁹⁹ Catherine Malabou & Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath: Travelling with Jacques Derrida*, trans. by David Wills (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 210.

signs, or signifiers, of age are a tacit monument to an inverse reality: immortality. In the literature of ageing studied in this thesis, we are confronted with a body of texts denuded of sophistry and illusion on the one hand, yet on the other are furnished with language whose metaphoricity, imprecision, displacement of the flesh, and semantic open-endedness give the illusion of multiple realities and subtly transforms the canonical indices of decline into a new paradigm of hope. Whilst the ordeal of ageing is apparent, it is also undermined, thwarted and deviated, couched in an ostensibly perfidious rhetoric that tempers and on occasion inverts the realities of age, and through its rhetorical devices and irreducible polysemy renders old age, at times, an occult nonknowledge.

A recurring theme in this thesis, then, has been the intimations of immortality in the semiology of age: the ostensible freedom and supernal privilege that exists within language, its rhetorical devices, polysemy and preciosity, its hedonistic self-referentiality and the philological and exegetical problematics of textuality. As Jacques Derrida comments:

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance [...] The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web: a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting it too as an organism, *indefinitely regenerating its own tissue* behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading [my italics].⁹⁰⁰

Literary erudition in a poststructuralist vein, with its repeated recourse to the infinite, the endless, and the endlessly deferred, reprieved, or forestalled –the play, that is, of ‘infinite reference’⁹⁰¹ and the lack of a semantic teleology –conveys a clear ideology, but no more so than when applied to the literature of age. As I discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, David Keck describes Alzheimer’s disease as deconstruction incarnate, and argues that

⁹⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p. 63.

⁹⁰¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 36.

humankind's fear is not of ageing, per se, but of a 'confrontation with deconstruction itself.'⁹⁰² This thesis has worked toward a broader consideration of the language of ageing as inherently deconstructive –a monument to poststructuralist thinking and, by extension, the antithesis to death and finality. By viewing a piece of literature poststructurally we offer both text and protagonist a seductive reprieve from Time, from fixity and finitude, from determinate contexts and 'the closure of knowledge.'⁹⁰³ Throughout this thesis I have argued that the very subject of old age is contestable, lateralised, and sublated in many contemporary narratives of ageing: from Beckett's semiological problematics, muted transcendentalism, fatuous quietism, 'conception of the body as a machine' and his 'denial of organic life;'⁹⁰⁴ to the use of xyloid metaphors, the wry defeatism, the effacement of the flesh, and the representation in contemporary fiction of senescing bodies as pseudo-natural ungestalt malformations or deformities; and finally to the way in which the spectacle of senility has provided an opportunity for experimental renewal and neo-modernistic polemicism in some more recent Alzheimer's fiction. Beckett, conscious though he is of ageing, gives little indication of time passed or time passing.

Ageing in Beckettian prose and stagecraft is caught up in this lacuna, this deconstructivist abyss and unwitting eternity which stems as much from Beckett's choreographic, scenic, linguistic, and syntactic decisions as the perambulations, digressions and deviations that these provoke in the reader. Beckett's bodies float about in the interstice between damnation and salvation, between senescence and sempiternity, and like many cultural discourses of age (which I come to later in this conclusion) seem to be built on an analogy between biological senescence and deviant robot teleology. Hassan points out how Beckett's bodies, in their

⁹⁰² David Keck, 'Deconstruction Incarnate: The Etiology and Teleology of Alzheimer's Disease' in *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 36.

⁹⁰³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Preface, *Of Grammatology*, p. lxxvii

⁹⁰⁴ Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, 2nd edn. (London & Wisconsin, USA: University of Wisconsin Press Ltd., 1982), p. 226.

troubled significations, are ungestalt figures, an almost anomalous slew of geometric objects or at best mechanical human simulacra. The characters seem liberated from time. However, with any mechanistic concept of temporality,⁹⁰⁵ Beckett's *dramatis personae* soon become personifications of the objective, coercive passage of time their inorganic bodies putatively elude. Consequently, Beckett's vision of ageing, like that of many authors mentioned in this thesis, is characterised by these terminal dualisms or doublings, flittering between plaintive spectacles of decay and begrudging, unwitting affirmations of immortality and indeterminacy.

The characters discussed in this thesis are tacitly immortalised by the very language that seeks to comprehend and lament their mortality. Many of the characters discussed embody the plight of Tithonus in the Homeric hymn to Aphrodite in which Eos asked Zeus to make Tithonus immortal but forgot to ask for eternal youth. I have attempted to draw attention to how literature's poetic or rhetorical embellishments, its lack of semantic constraints, its formal innovations, aleatory and often self-deconstructive inventory of allusions, juxtapositions and permutations, and its plethora of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, and theomorphisms render old age a reality, truth or literal meaning that is present in the text but always deferred or diverted away from itself, leaving the aged protagonist censured, obscured, thrown into obliquity and, most paradoxically of all, 'stubbornly inaccessible to time.'⁹⁰⁶ The literature of ageing studied is often self-deconstructing, delivered in language that articulates and comprehends the pathos of old age yet whose constructivist representations of the body, supervening allusions, metaphoricity,

⁹⁰⁵ See C. Davis Hendricks et al., *Time, Roles, and Self in Old Age*, ed. by Jaber F. Gubrium (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1976), pp. 14-5.

⁹⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Language to Infinity' *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by James Fabion, vol. 2, trans. by Robert Hurley et al. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 91.

and poststructuralist trappings give the illusion of ‘alternative possible worlds,’⁹⁰⁷ embroil the character in a semantic ascent beyond the limitations of the body, and ‘defe[r] the moment of encountering the thing itself, the moment at which we could lay hold of it, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, have a present intuition of it.’⁹⁰⁸ In its refusal to narrate ageing in the flesh, the signs of ageing in many contemporary narratives do not offer any sense of closure or finality. Instead they offer a teasingly and sometimes menacingly asymptotic relation to death, rendering the spectacle of decline, this ‘endless little body,’⁹⁰⁹ rarely far from and always haunted by semiotic phantoms of immortality. For Beckett’s characters this, their interminable age, is often explicitly alluded to, and in other literature such as Kingsley Amis’ *Ending Up* or Michel Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island*, this tormenting perpetuity is more implicitly present. In narrating mortality without recourse to the flesh, the characters are demonstrably and plaintively mortal yet subtextually immortal; immortalised by a visual lexicon that ‘could not end [them], left [them] maim’d / To dwell in presence of immortal youth, / Immortal age beside immortal youth.’⁹¹⁰ Through the refusal to narrate ageing in the flesh we are presented with a language of ageing that equivocates and self-doubts, prevaricates even in the face of character death, ‘posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it,’⁹¹¹ favours indeterminacy, recoils from coherence and closures, and through ‘the detour of the sign’⁹¹² allows realist or naturalistic portrayals to lapse into covertly trans-/posthuman ones, and the pathos of age the ideality (or tedium) of immortality.

⁹⁰⁷ Madan Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd edn. (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 50.

⁹⁰⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, ed. by John Wild, trans. by David B. Allison (USA: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 138.

⁹⁰⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Lessness* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970), p. 12.

⁹¹⁰ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Norman Page (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 138: 19-22.

⁹¹¹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’ in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 3rd edn., ed. by David H. Richter (USA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007), p. 877.

⁹¹² Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (USA: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), p. 9.

Edward Bellamy's short story 'The Old Folks' Party' (1898) introduces an important theme in this thesis: performativity. Bellamy describes a group of young friends and their droll imitation of age:

"My idea is this," said Henry, leaning back in his chair, with his hands clasped behind his head, and his long legs crossed before him. "Let us dress up to resemble what we expect to look like fifty years hence" [...] Eight o'clock was the hour at which the old folks' party began, and the reader will need a fresh introduction to the company which was assembled at that time in Mary Fellows's parlor. Mary sat by her grandmother, who from time to time regarded her in a half-puzzled manner, as if it required an effort of her reasoning powers to reassure her that the effect she saw was an illusion. The girl's brown hair was gathered back under a lace cap, and all that appeared outside it was thickly powdered. She wore spectacles, and the warm tint of her cheeks had given place to the opaque saffron hue of age. She sat with her hands in her lap, their fresh color and dimpled contour concealed by black lace half-gloves. The fullness of her young bosom was carefully disguised by the arrangement of the severely simple black dress she wore, which was also in other respects studiously adapted to conceal, by its stiff and angular lines.⁹¹³

By the thematising the 'natural' in a satirical context, Bellamy destabilises distinctions between youth and age, natural and performative, past and future, mortal and sempiternal. A central contention in this thesis has been that language, in effect, *performs*: that irrespective of the biomedical realities of age, it is paradoxically within the expressions and indices of decay and decline that both characters and consumers alike seem to locate and rehearse their immortality. What I would like to suggest is that Bellamy offers not so much a droll parody

⁹¹³ Edward Bellamy, 'The Old Folks' Party' in *The Blindman's World and Other Stories* (New York: Garrett Press, Inc., 1968), p. 74.

of age, but a parody of the discourses and signifying gestures through which old age is articulated and understood in contemporary western culture. The characters' enactment of age suggests a morbid curiosity for a condition which, for them, is little more than a hypothetical future or the occult of a far distant and potentially assailable reality. Bellamy's play on natural versus performative selves, youth versus age, past versus future, might may be argued to dramatise the fantasy of optionality and the postmodern de-conceptualisation of age: that is, the humanist fallacy of anti-ageing, and the avenues of escape and new modes of re-embodiment sought in consumer capitalism and enacted through consumption.⁹¹⁴ The garments and accoutrements in Bellamy's short story are metaphors for age: for the foreignness, constrictiveness, and essentialisms of age, the anarchic, defamiliarising, and self-alienating sensations of the dysfunctional body, and the putative antagonism between objective body-image and subjective self-image. However, because the characters' old age is caricatural, the signs, or signifiers, of age not only imply optionality, a possible cessation or reprieve mortality, but most paradoxically of all become tacit monuments to a potential immortality. It is through performing or enacting age that the characters repudiate it, and similarly in western culture and literature alike it is within the discourses and semiologies of ageing that we find our seductive, if perhaps delusive, reprieve from Time. The aged subject is couched in the western sophistry and specious reasoning of anti-ageing, and is poised against mortality, if not through medical, scientific, and technological innovation and success, then through linguistic pretense –that is, through a cultural-consumer vernacular that internalises and naturalises nonlinear conceptions of time and transcendentalist ideologies of defying or disinventing age. Bellamy's characters can be thought of as simultaneously young and old, mortal and sempiternal, but the dynamics of the mature identity may be thought of in comparable terms, particularly as the biomedical realities of an *ageing* society conflict yet

⁹¹⁴Mike Featherstone & Andrew Wernick (eds.), *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 11.

coexist with the expressions and locutions of an *anti-ageing* one. Irrespective of whether it becomes a reality, immortality has with a certain degree of insidiousness made a home within the rhetoric of age. It has come in part to define reality even though it is so clearly contrary to it, and should perhaps be thought of in terms of the linguistic performance –or rehearsal –of immortality that accompanies and dissimulates the increasingly prominent spectacle of age and decline. It is in this vein that David B. Morris comments:

Illness somehow defines us [...] Unlike robots or rabbits, humans possess a tendency toward repeated and often protracted illnesses that seem finally less a flaw in our design than a mysterious signature. Walk through any suburban mall, however, and you cannot avoid seductive displays promising miracle cures, ageless, bodies, and perpetual well-being, as if our main task in life were to defeat mortality.⁹¹⁵

Literary expressions of age seem as closely pursued by semiotic echoes of immortality as cultural discourses of ageing are their disavowing prefix ‘anti-’. Literary discourses, I have argued, express a certain reality about the ageing process, but in their recurrent displacement and disavowal of the flesh, also intervene on that process and impinge on its trajectory. The semiology of age precludes any definitive sense of the body’s totality, its corporeity, rhythms, cadences, betrayals, and provenance, and offers a counterintuitively oblique relation to ageing and mortality. The language, it seems, immortalises these ageing figures, is akin to a ‘revivalist discourse,’⁹¹⁶ a renunciation of mortality or celebration of existence albeit rarely, or never always convincingly, human. The literary discourse of age embellishes, prevaricates, misrepresents, and dissimulates the themes of time, organic decay, and death that predominate –gives the sense of plaintively mortal figures couched in the rhetoric, the

⁹¹⁵ David B. Morris, *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (London: University of California Press Ltd., 2000), p. 1.

⁹¹⁶ Clive Seale, *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 104.

lineaments, of eternity. It is difficult at times to distinguish whether an author is using fiction to explore and express age, or to seek and locate sanctuary from it within the vagaries and caprice of their own ambiguous significations. In the literature of age, and perhaps to a larger extent in the cultural narratives of ageing, the aged subject is never far from his or her own magus double: that is, the sempiternal or perpetually youthful self articulated into existence through discourses of consumerism; that is reinforced or reified by the abundance of anti-ageing paraphernalia, by anti-senescence medicine, by Anglo-American culture's ritualized deference and obeisance to youth, and by the successive de-conceptualisations of old age in an era that has, at the same time, made it an unavoidable and unassailable reality.

A central concern of this thesis has been the intimations of immortality in the language of decay and decline –of the premise that what is occurring, not necessarily on the level of theme and plot, but more implicitly at the semiotic level, is ‘warfare on the biology of old age.’⁹¹⁷ When considering the semiology of age in contemporary literature and the discursive cultural representations of ageing –particularly with regards their displacement of the flesh – I am often reminded of the uncompromising materialism of iatrophysicists such as Julien Offray de la Mettrie, with their mechanistic depictions of biological phenomena. La Mettrie's machine—man conceit, which is really a comparison between human and animal (and a reference to the Cartesian hypothesis that animals are machines bereft of souls)⁹¹⁸ is an attempt to explain the workings of the body in terms of its material constitution alone:

The human body is a watch, a large watch constructed with such skill and ingenuity, that if the wheel which marks the seconds happens to stop, the minute wheel turns and keeps on going its round, and in the same way the quarter-hour wheel, and all the others go on running when the first wheels have stopped because rusty or, for any

⁹¹⁷ David B. Morris, *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age*, p. 2.

⁹¹⁸ Ann Thomson, Introduction, *Machine Man and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. xvi.

reason, out of order. Is it not for a similar reason that the stoppage of a few blood vessels is not enough to destroy or suspend the strength of the movement which is in the heart as in the mainspring of the machine[?]⁹¹⁹

He describes the human body as ‘a collection of springs which wind each other up,’ and that the body is endowed with energy but, ‘like that of a pendulum, can not keep up forever. It must be renewed, as it loses strength, invigorated when it is tired, and weakened when it is disturbed.’⁹²⁰ Much of La Mettrie’s unyielding materialism extends that of Rene Descartes, who in *Treatise on Man* describes how the bodily functions including digestion, respiration, circulation, and the movement of the limbs ‘follow from the mere arrangement of the machine’s organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counter-weights and wheels.’⁹²¹ Contemporary discourses and semiotics of ageing call to mind the same uncompromising materialism as iatrophysicists such as La Mettrie. Culturally, we have a tendency to view the ageing body as a machine or ‘mechanism that is defined solely in terms of its demoted status,’ the transition, that is, between the ‘once active human subject’ to the impuissant, ‘sick, elderly and malfunctioning entity.’⁹²² Representations of the senescing body as a formless, inhuman, disembodied, post-bodied, even post-biological corporeality, dramatise this sense of threat –the insidious metamorphosis the body undergoes. The ageing body in Anglo-American culture is ‘seen as something foreign, something to be resisted [...] an objective machine-body [...] an alien thing rather than one with the self.’⁹²³ I have spoken often in this thesis about the displacement of the flesh in semiotics of age, of the self-deconstructing affinity in Beckett

⁹¹⁹ Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *Man a Machine* (La Salle & Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1953), p. 141.

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁹²¹ Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. by John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 108.

⁹²² Sarah Fishwick, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. by Peter Lang (USA: University of Michigan, 2002), p. 158.

⁹²³ Jennifer Bullington, ‘Being Body: The Dignity of Human Embodiment’ in *Dignity in Care for Older People*, ed. by Lennart Nordenfelt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009), pp. 73-4.

and in more recent fiction of Michel Houellebecq between gerontological and technological discourse, between the physical involution of the body and deviant or defective robot teleologies, biological determinism and technological determinism, and ultimately, organic decay and sempiternity. The image of the self-directed, self-regulating machine or mechanical device in western culture might be argued to pervade gerontological discourse, emblemise ‘the culturally provoked fear of ageing,’⁹²⁴ and hyperbolise the disintegration of bodily boundaries involved in decay, the phenomenological foreignness, self-distance, or alienity in moments of pain, dysfunction, and collapse, the loss of self-command, and the disruptiveness, aversiveness, and involuntariness of the dysfunctional body –as if acting, or performing, under the hegemony of external control. As in iatrophysics, the semiotics of age offer mechanistic representations of physiological phenomena, but in this carries counterrealist inflections that tacitly immortalise the individual, or intervene on old age.

Technology may be argued to symbolise progress, the secularisation and bureaucratisation of the theological premise of victory over death, the instrumentality of the world around us and our ontological allegiance to it, and an occidental metaphysics that unites the Cartesian mind/body, the subjective self-image and objective body-image, towards an ageless, incarnate subjectivity. However, one of my key arguments arising from the erasure of embodiment and the suggestions and residual images of post-bodiedness in the semiologies of age has been the use of technology as a metaphor for old age and the various losses it entails: that is, technologisation as a metaphor for organic decay and retrograde biological processes, and with it the affinity between gerontocracy and technofatalist dystopia. In attempting to capture the subjective, prelinguistic experience of the body natural, to locate and externalise the defamiliarising sensations, the kinaesthesias and coenaesthesias of the senescing body, and the existential challenges presented in moments of pain and impuissance,

⁹²⁴ Sarah Fishwick, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 158.

the image of the machine, or more specially a penal rather than liberating trans-/posthumanity, seems particularly prevalent in both literary and cultural discourse. One of the themes I have not emphasised in this thesis has been the gendered semiology of age, for the reason that the signs of ageing (in their semiotic sense) erase all biological markers, reduce the body to an unruly, protean object, a maladroit, post-carbon, degendered or even post-gendered assemblage, inhuman and demeaning in its ‘thingness’, and to which all biological assignations seem curiously irrelevant or simply inapplicable. That said, Simone de Beauvoir is often credited with gendering the machine, narrating the reproductive body in post-menopausal women as ‘a mechanism which fails to respond normally to crucial “signals” or “messages” [...] a system which is malfunctioning or out of control because it fails to respond to “authority” in the form of bodily “signals.”’⁹²⁵ The images of ageing in literary discourse are semiotic phantoms of immortality, or give indication of our posthuman futures. It is not necessarily technological discourse, extropian philosophy, and trans- or posthumanism that gives us an idea of the ‘unprecedented synthesis of the organic and the mechanical,’⁹²⁶ but literary and cultural representations of biological entropy and the plights of the old.

The literature I have discussed in this thesis engages with subject of ageing on a thematic level, but linguistically, stylistically, or typographically seems to prevaricate, distort or pervert the images of ageing and the plights of the characters. Whilst subtly transforming biologicistic representations of age into constructivist ones, realist evocations into covertly trans- or posthumanist ones, and actual bodies into conceptual, fictive, or imagined ones, the dehumanisation of ageing bodies does resonate socio-politically. One might suggest that the more abstract, immortalised, deified, or demonstrably inhuman the protagonists appear the closer they are to cultural and sociological cliché. Perhaps one of commonest verbs in

⁹²⁵ Ibid., p. 146.

⁹²⁶ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (London: University of Chicago Press Ltd., 1999), p. 8.

sociological discourse on the elderly is *dehumanise*. Although this expression is a clear indictment of the attitudes towards or demeaning treatment of the elderly –whether in palliative care or in the broader cultural context –it also communicates a great deal about the linguistic expressions of age which seem to simultaneously express and vitiate, affirm and negate mortality. The cultural expressions of old age, ironically, have clear counterrealist inflections that disassociate or relinquish the aged subject from the putatively deviant and essentialising concepts of time, organic decay, and death. Victor Minichiello describes the ‘dehumanising context’ and ‘dehumanising process’ within which the elderly are cared for, commenting that there is a threat of social castigation and a danger amongst carers of the elderly ‘to treat aged care residents in instrumental ways, regarding them as objects of work stress rather than as people.’⁹²⁷ Minichiello goes on to describe discourses and perceptions of the elderly as essentialising, othering, and superannuating, which:

...have the effect of dehumanising older people. When we dehumanise certain groups it makes it easier for us to deny them basic human rights, to treat them with disrespect and to devalue their experiences and desires. Each of these strategies perpetuates a form of violence towards the ageing, perhaps not in the overt form of violence which marks the body, but in a disavowal of their humanness. It is important therefore to identify each of these strategies in our language and to begin to develop alternatives.⁹²⁸

Minichiello highlights the social, conceptual, and linguistic disengagement from ageing: that is, the perceptions and locutions of age which are demeaning, prejudicial, and disconcertingly taxonomical in their reconceptualisation of the elderly as sub-adult or even sub-human, and the ideas and expressions of otherness, deviance, parasitism, and alienation that are

⁹²⁷ Victor Minichiello, *Contemporary Issues in Gerontology: Promoting Positive Ageing* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 16-7.

⁹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

internalised and naturalised in Anglo-American culture. Haim Hazan describes this as ‘social denial’ and a ‘discursive process of dehumanisation [that] may be detected in the conspiracy of silence surrounding concerns associated with ageing and particularly with deep old age.’⁹²⁹ The sociolinguistic exclusions, ‘otherings’ and oppressive essentialisms suggest a society ill at ease with ageing, and communicate a libidinal fear of death, or more specifically of the dehumanising and desubjectivising threat posed by extreme old age and the losses that degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease entail. Malcolm Johnson describes old age as ‘a deviant state in a society which celebrates youth and has not yet accustomed itself to the demographic revolution,’⁹³⁰ and a threat to the ideological optimism of the anti-ageing revolution. Physical and aesthetic changes in the body exteriorise covert biological processes, and the locus or provenance of self-identity becomes instead an insidious manifestation of otherness, impuissance, and subjugation to forces beyond one’s control. John A. Vincent comments that ‘because there is a tendency for modern people to see their identity as increasingly associated with their bodies [...] the prospect of death and decay of the body poses specific existential problems,’ and that chronic or degenerative conditions ‘can serve to dehumanise people.’⁹³¹ This notion of self-difference, deviance, or alienation –of acting or existing under the hegemony of external control –is perhaps most commonly represented in the invidious cultural metaphor of the ‘ageing body as a dehumanised machine that is disintegrating, disordered and out of control.’⁹³²

Ostensibly, western culture presents ageing as a condition that is manifestly, although not always convincingly, human: it is, as Simon Biggs describes, ‘a process of dispossession and cover-up, an exercise teetering on the brink of the grotesque,’ whilst youth remains the

⁹²⁹ Haim Hazan, ‘Beyond Dialogue: Entering the Fourth Space in Old Age’ in *Valuing Older People: A Humanist Approach to Ageing* (Bristol: The Polity Press, 2009), p. 98.

⁹³⁰ Malcolm Johnson, ‘Dependency and Interdependency’ in *Ageing in Society: An Introduction to Social Gerontology*, 2nd edn., ed. by John Bond et al. (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1993), p. 265.

⁹³¹ John A. Vincent, *Old Age* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 154.

⁹³² Sarah Fishwick, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 159.

‘normative state to which the body has to be restored.’⁹³³ In her preface to *The Coming of Age* Simone de Beauvoir writes ‘I mean to break the conspiracy of silence,’⁹³⁴ and comments on senescence and the elderly respectively as a reality plunged into mythos, and a demographic (and an increasingly visible one at that) forced back into the mystique of a non-knowledge or curio. Beauvoir depicts the elderly as a demographic in the throes of existential or ‘metaphysical’ vertigo in the sense that society ‘does not look upon the aged as belonging to one clearly-defined category.’⁹³⁵ Because the elderly do not form a body with any economic strength, she argues, ‘bourgeois thought aim[s] at holding up the elderly man as someone who is different, as *another being*,’ even to the extent of belonging ‘to an entirely different species.’⁹³⁶ Beauvoir describes the ‘aged’ or the ‘old’ as a condition or state of being that has slipped into the recesses of imagination, fancy, or conjecture:

age is removed from us by an extent of time so great that it merges with eternity: such a remote future seems unreal [...] Thinking of myself as an old person when I am twenty or forty means thinking of myself as someone else, as *another*.⁹³⁷

Ageist attitudes, then, might be thought of as counterintuitively *anti-essentialist* and self-contradicting in the sense that by mythologising old age, by thinking of the elderly in terms of the occult and slipperiness of a non-knowledge –by making them, in effect, unknowable (however feigned we know that to be) –we move away from the generalisations, reductionism, and platitudes of ageism or stereotype towards a more libertarian discourse within which old age and presumably other ‘human’ biological markers are vacated, transcended, or rendered simply inapplicable. Old age is rendered a specious reality, placed at

⁹³³ Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), p. 75.

⁹³⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. by Patrick O’Brian (London & New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 2.

⁹³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

arm's length, or rendered anachronistic, a socio-biological atavism, through the hubris and sophistry of affluent, medically/scientifically sophisticated cultures –cultures within which discrimination of the elderly is not only internalised and naturalised but has, with anti-ageing, become akin to a form of humanism or enlightened prejudice. However, Beauvoir claims that even in the veneration and 'purified image' of old age, the elderly remain set apart from society, called upon to be the 'venerable Sage, rich in experience, planning high above the common state of mankind.' Therefore, she continues, 'either by their virtue or by their degradation they stand outside humanity.'⁹³⁸ Whether the elderly are revered or reviled, whether society offers prejudice or deference, the same points of exclusion and discursive/linguistic barriers remain. For some it is the metonymic expressions of age, rather than the pervasive and sometimes invidious liturgies of youth, within which 'the basis for the denial of elderly personhood is formed.'⁹³⁹ Jenny Hockey describes how 'selective use is made of the body as a referential source through establishing metonymic relationships. Thus, the adjective "wrinkly" can become a noun used to refer to elderly people.'⁹⁴⁰ This draws attention to their plaintive corporeality with clear existential imputations, and articulates the elderly into a progressive and anticipative nonentity or nullity, a jointly transcendental and insidious absence, inexistence, metaphysicality, or lawness contingency. The metonymic expressions of age, like the mechanistic and constructivist representations of biological senescence, seem paradoxical in the sense that they render the individual reducible to their body's pathologies whilst simultaneously *denying* them the body with which they are thus afflicted.

Whilst it is commented that the elderly 'remind the rest of us of the possibility of nameless animal death and absolute annihilation [and] serve as vivid reminders of our animal and

⁹³⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁹³⁹ Jenny Hockey et al., *Images of Ageing*, p. 143.

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid.

therefore mortal nature,⁹⁴¹ the articulation of precisely this reality and this threat seems to efface and never fully or convincingly capture the ‘biological’. Whether through metonymy or the cultural metaphor of the machine, representations of age eschew the totality and organicity of the body, and contradict or nullify the very idea of organic decay through the implications of a post-bodied or post-biological corporeality. The spectacle of decline and our expressions, lamentations, revulsion and libidinal fear of it, convey an ideal not in the sense that old age is repressed, vacated or ignored, but because the disdainful and pejorative representations used to convey its pathos, its inevitability, and its social disapproval implicitly deny them, preclude, or invert the biological: the vicissitudes, finitude, and constitutive frailty, that is, of the body natural. Paradoxical though it is, what I suggest, then, is that it is not in consumer culture’s eroticised images of youth, beauty, and health that we locate and rehearse our most oneiric fantasies of immortality, but in the abject and plaintive spectacle of decay. The idea of a ‘dehumanised’ old age seems to relate primarily to the ostracism, prejudice, and maltreatment of the elderly; it communicates a social reality of ageing as marked by ‘a negative mixture of pity, fear, disgust, condescension, and neglect.’⁹⁴² The dehumanisation of old age has conventionally been related to an inability or unwillingness to accept our own finitude, and to a repressed or reticent awareness of mortality and a delusive belief in immortality –exacerbated, paradoxically, by rising life expectancies and the increasing salience of the elderly, and perpetuated and sustained by the hubris and ideological optimism of high-income, technologically advanced cultures. As Norbert Elias describes in *The Loneliness of the Dying*, it is:

[the] attempt to avoid the thought of death by pushing it as far from ourselves as possible –by hiding and repressing the unwelcome idea –or by holding an unshakable

⁹⁴¹ Jeff Greenberg et al., ‘Ageism: Denying the Face of the Future’ in *Ageism: Stereotyping and the Prejudice Against Older Persons*, ed. by Todd D. Nelson (USA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 41.

⁹⁴² Mike Featherstone et al., *Images of Ageing*, p.30.

belief in our own personal immortality [...] There is a strong tendency towards this in the advanced societies of our day.⁹⁴³

However, whilst this dehumanisation of the elderly is often perceived to distance young, middle aged, or ‘nonold’⁹⁴⁴ from the realities of old age, what I argue is that what in fact it does is distance the *elderly* from the realities of old age. In the appropriation of prejudicial and derisory attitudes towards senescence –in our very age-consciousness and compulsive scrutiny of age characteristics –we locate not the pathos of age, but its ideality. To narrate the elderly individual as demonstrably ‘other’, or with an impassive and dehumanising indexicality –as a mere catalogue, that is, of the body’s pathologies –we problematise the very idea of mortality. It is through these verbal habits that we rehearse an inverse reality – that of immortality – and render conventional limitations, boundaries, or definitions of the body such as age and gender curiously inapplicable. Whilst the dehumanisation of old age connotes a social reality related to ageism, it simultaneously challenges, precludes, or even inverts the *biological* reality of senescence. The tacit artifice that underpins the representations and language of old age reaffirm the fact that old age is not simply a biological reality but a cultural construct. The successive de-conceptualisations of old age – that is, the images of robot-like human simulacra which seem to place the ageing subject indeterminately between the pathos of old age and the fantasy of its transcendence –go some way toward embodying the cultural non-acceptance of or incredulity toward ageing, the faith in science, technology, and medicine to intervene on the body, and the presumption of its transcendence. The images and linguistic expressions of age are paradoxical in the sense that they communicate disdainful attitudes towards old age and a clear preoccupation with the spectacle of decay and decline; yet they carry counterrealist inflections, displace the body

⁹⁴³ Norbert Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2001), p. 1.

⁹⁴⁴ Jeff Greenberg et al., *Ageism: Stereotyping and the Prejudice Against Older Persons*, p. 28.

natural, and, in the ‘desubjectivisation’ of the elderly and the common metaphorical depiction of the ‘sick and aged body as an old, out of control machine,’⁹⁴⁵ internalise ideas of its transcendence. The cultural expressions and indices of decay and decline seem self-deconstructive and anamorphic, offering no biological markers, no contours, defining features, limitations or providence to the body, and not always offering a determinable idea of chronological age. They place the aged subject beyond the scope of the organic, render the body natural suggestively post-biological, de-gendered or even post-gendered, and most paradoxically of all, vacate, displace and ignore the biological reality of senescence. As such, some of the cultural expressions of age, paradoxical though it is, may be thought of as pre-empting victory over death and tacitly celebrating, or at least conceding the possibility of, immortality in the very spectacle of decay.

The semiologies of age discussed in this thesis embody a social reality of ageing, but at the expense of the biomedical reality. The aged figures studied in this thesis seem often to be satirical, anamorphic spectacles, de-gendered or post-gendered, divirilised, subjugated, and woefully plaintive figures; yet they are, as I have described, tacit monuments to an alternate reality, liminal, transitional figures, betwixt and between the geriatric and posthuman, putatively impoverished and abject in their age, but subliminally or subtextually eternal. With the commodification of immortality in consumer discourses, the blandishments and ideological optimism of prolongevity medicine, the genealogy of anti-ageing in antecedent medical and proverbial discourse, it seems that a rupture has occurred between the linguistic expressions of age and its biomedical reality. What makes western culture so fascinating with regards to the study of age is that language is beguiling and blandiloquous, convincing us of a reality our bodies cannot sustain. Physically humankind is mortal, and we are no more aware of this than today as rising life expectancies put strain on welfare systems and as consumer

⁹⁴⁵ Sarah Fishwick, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 158.

capitalism wantonly and immorally exploits the fact of demographic change and the existential challenges and corporeal hermeneutics prompted by the increasingly pervasive sight of age. However, linguistically we are in the midst of an inverse reality, a cultural vernacular that is prevaricative, habituates consumers to the language of time travel, rejuvenation, and sempiternity, and creates a culture in which the biological reality of old age is met with the dialogic reality of immortality. Through the language of ageing and in the spectacle of decay an alternate reality is located and rehearsed. It is not so much in medicalisation and aestheticisation *out* of age but rather the linguistic expressions *of* age where the limits and potentialities of the body are redefined and reconceptualised. Whilst the body senesces, grows more vulnerable, more impuissant, one finds in our discourse on it semiotic echoes of immortality. Through the antinomies in western culture –the warring, that is, between demography and ideology, or in other words, between an ageing culture and an anti-ageing culture –we have become Tithonian figures. The myth of Tithonus and the image of immortality without perpetual youth is a striking emblem, and one that I have attempted to show pervades the contemporary semiologies of age. The literature of ageing, with its thematic preoccupation with age and its semiotic transcendence of it, offers a language capable of hosting a double reality. The socio-semiotic constructions of age offer up an aporetic, constructivist vision of old age, a jointly penal and liberatory ambiguity that apprehends and perverts the image of age and, with its thematic preoccupations with decrepitude but counterrealist inflections, transforms the depreciation of old age readily into its ideality, and makes the reader aware, perhaps, of the realities in which we –as members of a culture at once ageing and anti-ageing –operate.

The literature of ageing, specifically Alzheimer's narratives, has in recent decades been applauded for its heuristic potential, its role as a gerontological resource and 'a valuable font of information about old age [...] because it portrays and interprets common-place thoughts

and feelings about aging that are experienced in everyday life.⁹⁴⁶ Lindauer describes the visual arts as communicating meanings about old age directly, immediately, and unequivocally, and speaks of the signified concept as concretely held, thus ‘allow[ing] for an immediate impression, and a flow of ideas, thoughts, and images that are less subject to distractions, interruptions, and losses in information.’ He comments on how:

Paintings depicting the aged can be quickly comprehended [...] In contrast a novel or play about an old person requires a fairly long time to unfold, many characters have to be kept in mind together with their motives, often obscure, along with sub plots whose meanings are not immediately obvious. Complex information about a central aging figure is easily forgotten or distorted; and interruptions, delays, and disruptions that occur over an extended reading period increase the likelihood of memory lapses.⁹⁴⁷

Lindauer’s comments on ageing in literature and the visual arts encourage us to think about what literature contributes to our understanding of old age, and what ‘reality’ it is able to convey and with what effect. I have said that in western culture the aged individual is put at a distance, pushed into repression and sublimation both socially and discursively. What literary discourses of age offer is its equivalent: ‘an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving reality (an openended present).’⁹⁴⁸ I have described the signs of ageing (in their semiotic sense) as having an asymptotic relation to death and finality, and the literature of ageing to be characterised by experimental renewal and neo-modernistic energy and flair. In the semiologies of age in contemporary literature we are made aware both of old age, its pathos and ineluctable reality, and its incipient alternative. From the prose and dramaturgy of Samuel Beckett to post-2000

⁹⁴⁶ Martin S. Lindauer, *Aging, Creativity, and Art: A Positive Perspective on Late-Life Development* (New York: Plenum Publishers, 2003), p. 25.

⁹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁴⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson et al. (USA: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 7.

Alzheimer's fiction, the senescing characters, these protei of contemporary fiction, are pitiful, plaintive, and moribund spectacles, revealing a morbid and quintessentially human preoccupation with mortality; but with equal measure are celebrants and tacit monuments of perpetual life, revealing the semiologies of age and organic decay as a *jouissant* affirmation of immortality.

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