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Ageing and Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's Fiction

In "The Victory Burlesk", a short story from Margaret Atwood's 1983 collection, *Murder in the Dark*, the unnamed young female narrator recalls attending, in a spirit of arch irony, a burlesque show. She particularly enjoys the theatricality of the spectacle – the lights; colors; the skill of the performers. A dancer commences a strip-tease. With her back to the audience, the woman's undulating body promises titillation and display, "but when she finally turned around, she was old"; her face is powdered, her lips are painted, "but she was old" (24). The narrator's immediate reaction is one of shame: an internalized, rather than externalized expression of horror: "I felt that I, not the woman on the stage, was being exposed and humiliated" (24).

In this short story – just a couple of pages long – the ageing body is entirely grotesque, and made more so for its incongruous and indecorous manifestation within an erotic context. It is, furthermore, an explicitly female ageing body and it is inarguably this gendered element that draws from the narrator the unwanted identification with the dancer. In this moment, the distance between self and other collapses, as the narrator is compelled to imagine her own future body, aged and decrepit, exposed to ridicule and disgust. "The Victory Burlesk" is a succinct exposition of Atwood's ready and longstanding cognizance of the overlapping concerns with power and subjectivity that mark both female experience and the alterity of old age. It prefigures later texts such as *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and *Moral Disorder* (2006), in which ageing and its relation to selfhood – specifically, the phenomenological conundrum of what Erik Erikson calls "one's selfsameness and continuity in time" (1959, 22) – increasingly come to the fore in Atwood's work.

Moving beyond the limits of medical gerontology, old age is increasingly the focus of multidisciplinary study, as biological perspectives on ageing are supplemented by psychoanalytic, philosophical and sociological analyses of what it means to live a long life. These disciplines are more likely (and increasingly so) to foreground the role of individual agency in the experience of old age. For example, discussing social gerontology in *Cultures of Ageing*, Christopher Gilleard and Paul Higgs point to a move away from traditional structuralist analyses based on health and political economics, towards “more reflexive approaches to understanding the formation and maintenance of ageing identities” that reject social causality for “individual narrative and difference” (12). Ageing, suggest Gilleard and Higgs, is a cultural process: less “something that happens to people” and more “something individuals have to engage with” (13). This prioritization of the individual experience over the structural process makes narrative fiction an ideal form for exploring such theorizations of how old age is experienced and expressed.

Theories of ageing that emphasize agency tend to be predicated on broadly positive notions of the “third age” – a flexible, autonomous, post-working-life identity: what Peter Laslett terms “the age of personal achievement and fulfilment” – as opposed to the “fourth age”: a bleak, terminal period of “dependence, decrepitude and death” (Laslett 4). (This same distinction underpins Gilleard and Higgs’s position; while they assert the plasticity of ageing, *old age*, instead, “lies sullen and unchanging – represented as the end of the social; a point in life after which further choices are irrelevant” (3-4).) Quite apart from this nominal division of age and old age, this affirmative rhetoric of the third age is commonly met with objections regarding inequalities of access to agency due to class and, perhaps to a lesser extent, race and gender. While acknowledging such inequities, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth argue that, for those with social and economic means, old age can represent a “plateau-like

phase of adult life, with continued relatively high consumption and the pursuit of consumer culture life-styles, body maintenance and styles of self-presentation” (146). This is an image of the self in old age as stable, unitary and secure. By this reckoning, ageing, which, as Featherstone and Hepworth note, is often “characteristically defined as a mask which conceals the essential identity of the person beneath” (148), is an outward change that nevertheless leaves the true inner self intact. It is primarily this question – of the nature and coherence of subjectivity in old age – with which this article is concerned, as I look to examine how Atwood utilizes the methodologies of narrative fiction to explore this same issue.

Ageing has always been a crucial paradigm within Atwood’s work. Her primarily female protagonists are repeatedly confronted with the specter of their own old age. For twenty-something Marianne in *The Edible Woman* (1969), who thinks herself too young to join the company pension scheme, the middle-aged women in her office are “toad-like and sluggish” (17-18) and old age is “a bleak room with a plug-in electric heater” and “a hearing aid” (21). At fifty – “halfway across, halfway over” (13) – Elaine Risley in *Cat’s Eye* (1988) contemplates the department store cosmetics hall that promises rejuvenation: “I’d use anything if it worked – slug juice, toad spit, eye of newt, anything at all to mummify myself, stop the drip drip of time” (113). While eighty-two year old Iris Chase in *The Blind Assassin*, her arm “a brittle radius covered slackly with porridge and string” (45), suspects that she unwittingly emits “a stink of stale flesh and clouded, ageing pee” (43). Old age, in Atwood’s fictions, is predominantly conceived of in terms of physical deterioration – frequently couched, as Teresa Gibert (2005), in an essay on the aesthetics of ageing in Atwood’s work demonstrates, in terms of rot and decay. The body, in this process of inevitable decline,

becomes increasingly grotesque, traitorous, *other*. As Iris, in what remains Atwood's most sustained contemplation of ageing, explains:

It's an affront, all of that. Weak knees, arthritic knuckles, varicose veins, infirmities, indignities – they aren't ours, we never wanted them or claimed them. Inside our heads we carry ourselves perfected – ourselves at the best age, and in the best light (381).

This sense of disassociation – the affirmation that the body and its limitations is not the sum of a person's subjectivity – is coupled with a clear manifestation of what Helen Small in *The Long Life* (2007) terms the “layered” (3) relation we commonly hold with our sense of our own age (the manner in which self-perception rarely coincides with either calendric reality or the perception of others). These elements bring Atwood's novel into dialogue with current debates on the nature of ageing that intersect with earlier second-wave feminist arguments about female subjectivity and the body that reach back to Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* (1949).

Second-wave feminism pursued the politics of the body with urgency, variously delineating and explicating the myriad means by which the female body was historically and commonly objectified, vilified and policed. These debates cumulatively contributed to a complex and detailed feminist critical discourse around the body, its limitations and its potential. As feminist-engaged theorists, from Beauvoir to Hélène Cixous to Judith Butler, sought to either privilege a notion of female selfhood that might be disentangled from biological imperatives, or to reclaim a corporeality that might instead potently reveal the essence of the feminine, what remained largely absent from these analyses was any significant consideration of the

ageing body. Second-wave feminism largely remained silent on the impact of age on female experience and the manner in which gender might shape the experience of ageing.

While certain prominent feminist theorists did, with time, turn their critical attentions towards ageing (most notably: Beauvoir's *Old Age* [1970]; Germaine Greer's *The Change* [1993]; and Betty Friedan's *Fountain of Age* [1993]), these texts nevertheless failed to mark a significant shift in feminist critical attentions. As Silvia Stoller, discussing the relative obscurity of Beauvoir's *Old Age* (*La Vieillesse*, 1970) in the feminist critical canon, muses: "maybe the twentieth century was the age when "gender" required all the attention feminists could raise" (8). It has been left instead – as Jeanette King demonstrates in *Discourses of Ageing in Feminism and Fiction* – to novelists such as Margaret Laurence, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, and Angela Carter "to fill the gap left by second-wave feminism's silence on the subject of age, and to locate where, if anywhere, a feminist discourse of ageing can be found." (xvi)

In conceptualizing such a discourse, King proposes that a feminist examination of the impact of age would "recognise the socially constructed nature of both gender and ageing" (172). Drawing on Butler's theories of gender performativity, King suggests that the same principle, whereby a gendered identity is constituted by reiterative acts, might be applied to the performance of age. And much as the reiteration of gender norms might, as Butler argued in *Gender Trouble* (1990), work to expose and subvert their social constructedness (in Butler's words: "to expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power" [Butler xxxi]), so, proposes King, "If the embodied subject can engage with those discourses [of ageing] from an appositional perspective, she may construct

an identity for herself that is determined neither by the ageing body nor by the discourses that construct it as “ageing” (172-73).

King’s envisioned feminist discourse of ageing utilizes the critical insights into socially constructed female identity advanced by feminist theorists to provide a perspective on female ageing that, she argues, fiction writers are particularly adept at explicating. It is also, crucially, dependent on a view of ageing as a process that is not exclusively and fundamentally delimited by biology. For King, a text such as Carter’s *Wise Children* (1991) explores the possibilities of what this might look like. In Carter’s final novel, bawdy 75-year-old narrator Dora “constructs an identity triumphantly undetermined by her ageing body” (King, 173). Energetic, sexual, humorous, crude: the Rabelaisian narrative makes the material reality of the ageing female unapologetically visible, while simultaneously demonstrating, as King argues, that, ultimately, “Dora is her discourse and her intentionality rather than her body” (182).

In Atwood’s work, with its repeated returns to the ageing body and what it means to be old, the promise that Carter’s Dora seems to proffer – that one might age and remain vitally, essentially one’s self – is examined with rigor and occasional skepticism. To recall “The Victory Burlesk”, the image of old age on display in that early short story is determinedly confrontational. The dancer’s abject aged body, with its “white mask of a face” (24), is obscene: it is an indecent exhibit. In her unthinkable visibility, she demands that the spectating narrator acknowledge the materiality of her existence. Performing in a theatrical context of smoke and mirrors, “The trick was that suddenly there was no trick: the body up there was actual, it was ageing” (24-25). The display elicits the narrator’s recognition of their shared human predicament – “like us it was caught in time” (25) – but fails to obtain any kind

of reciprocity of selfhood, as the old woman remains, for the narrator, a mute, inscrutable object.

This same Sartrean notion of reciprocity underpins Beauvoir's writing in *Old Age*. For Beauvoir, to be old is effectively to be deemed as other than fully human: to "stand outside humanity" (10). Indeed, she argues that as a culture (Western, European), we are more comfortable with the idea of death than of old age: in death, we disappear, but retain our essential identity; contemplating old age, instead, "means thinking of [ourselves] as someone else as *another* than [our self]" (11). The discomfit that this notion arouses persuades us to ignore our own inevitable (bar premature fatality) procession into old age. ("Die early, or grow old: there is no other alternative" [315], as Beauvoir drily summates). Instead, we persist in the willful self-delusion that old age only happens to other people; an indulgence that Atwood wryly acknowledges in her 2007 poem "At Brute Point", in which the speaker, observing "the old people" muses: "Could it be that we are the old people / already? / Surely not. / Not with such hats." (*The Door* 126). In part, for Beauvoir, this is a natural response to the unpalatable realities of old age:

Apart from some exceptions, the old man no longer *does* anything. He is defined by an *axis*, not by a *praxis*: a being, not a doing. Time is carrying him towards an end – death – which is not *his* and which is not postulated or laid down by any project. (244)

The old, by this measure, have rescinded their full subjectivity, inasmuch as they are no longer actively in pursuit of the measures that cumulatively construct a selfhood. As Small puts it, Beauvoir "is terrified of the possibility (one she finds amply documented by history) that in old age our minds may "unravel" and we shall betray ourselves, reneging on projects

and sympathies that have hitherto defined our life” (13). Faced with this horror – the fear that age represents an undoing of the self – it is perhaps no wonder that, as the narrator in “The Victory Burlesk” illustrates, “old age arouses a biological repugnance: from a kind of self-defence one thrusts it from one-self” (Beauvoir, *Old Age* 244). The silence on which Atwood’s short story concludes – “The Victory Burlesk went dead. Nobody made a sound.” (25) – might be read, therefore, as an articulate silence, sketching out an absence or gap indicative of the audience’s (and by extension, the reader’s) inability to afford or even imagine a reciprocity of selfhood to the old woman who stands spectacularly before them.

“The Victory Burlesk” concludes on the ineffable nature of old age. Viewed from outside, it seems an alien and disturbing condition. With later texts, instead, Atwood shifts her narrative perspective so that ageing narrators are forced to confront for themselves what it means to be old – what it means to become the unimaginable other. Atwood’s older protagonists must address Beauvoir’s troubling introspection: “Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?” (*Old Age*, 315). In these later texts, Atwood explores old age more deeply, probing further into the problem of reciprocity and contemplating at length questions that ageing raises about the unity and coherence of selfhood across the course of a long life. And in the two texts that attend to these issues with greatest care – *The Blind Assassin* and *Moral Disorder* – she utilizes strikingly different narrative methods to explore how the relation between old age and the self might best be expressed.

Living in Time: *The Blind Assassin*

In *The Long Life*, Small proposes that our assumptions and anxieties regarding old age are bound up with our thinking about life itself: about “what it means to live a life; what it means to live a *good* life; what it means to be a person ... what is entailed in living in time” (21).

These same questions attend Atwood's depiction of old age in *The Blind Assassin*. Structured as a broadly linear retrospective memoir interspersed with contemporary commentary, newspaper clippings, and excerpts from the embedded novella "*The Blind Assassin*", the novel manifests an idea of what it means to live in time. As she contemplates the inevitably looming conclusion to both life and story – "*The end*, a warm safe haven. A place to rest. But I haven't reached it yet, and I'm old and tired, and on foot, and limping" (607) – octogenarian Iris's narrative raises questions about what it means to maintain a unified sense of self along the length of an extended life. What the novel reveals, finally, is a life comprised of many selves, each shaped by contingency. Iris, over the course of years, is variously a dutiful daughter; a reluctantly protective sister; society bride; adulterous lover; single mother; antiques dealer; heavy drinker; a naïve victim and a knowing "assassin". Each of these selves – some public, some private – participates in the construction of "Iris", and each contributes to the novel's exploration of the nature of selfhood.

Irrespective of old age, Iris has always been characterized by a notably mutable and permeable sense of self. As a child she bemoans the fact that, while her sister Laura preferred the letter *L*, she instead never had a favorite: "*I was everybody's letter*" (110). Much of the subsequent novel is seemingly predicated on Iris's compulsion to extricate herself and her past from the embedded story of her younger sister. Challenging this idea, however, Alan Robinson, in an essay on the functioning of memory, knowledge and agency in *The Blind Assassin*, excavates the text and its multiple crossing timelines for clues as to the identity of "the 'she' who is referred to with deliberate pronominal obliquity" (355) throughout the narrative, and finally concludes that the novel remains determinedly ambiguous. Indeed, rather than a proprietorial project, asserting authorial autonomy, Iris's memoir eventually embraces Laura's inextricable contribution, eventually concluding: "you could say she was

my collaborator ... Laura was my left hand, and I was hers" (626-27). Robinson ascribes this conclusion to Iris's manifold need to expiate the guilt she feels for her role in Laura's death; to protest a hegemonic masculinity that demands ritual self-sacrifice (of women's lives, but also, as Robinson notes, of the lives of young men in wartime); and finally, to memorialize the dead. (This latter motive he ties to Atwood's thesis in the 2002 non-fiction text, *Negotiating with the Dead*, in which she argues that all writing "is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality" (*Negotiating* 156).) Ostensibly an attempt at individuation, *The Blind Assassin* becomes instead an acceptance of perviousness, as Iris recognizes that her life story is inextricably bound up with and infiltrated by the life of another.

If Iris eventually overcomes her anxieties around the potentially dilutive effect of sisterhood on subjectivity, the novel remains nevertheless concerned with the impact of ageing on the integrity of the self. Looking in the mirror, the elderly Iris sees a palimpsest of former selves – young girl; mother; grandmother – each "floating just beneath my present face" (53). Later, she imagines herself as "Little Red Riding Hood on her way to Granny's house via the underworld. Except that I myself am Granny, and I contain my own bad wolf" (449). These figurations depict selfhood as multifarious and cumulative, whereby a person in old age is the sum of each successive iteration of his or her self. This accords with Small's suggestion that "Most of us have a deeply entrenched need to understand our lives and the lives of others not just as instantiated in the moment but as accruing their meaning with the passage of the years" (Small 93). Iris points to a cognate idea when she muses: "Age thins your skin; you can see the veins, the tendons. Also it thickens you. It's hard to get back to what you were before, when you were skinless" (588). Ageing, here, involves the accumulation of strata of experience. (It is also a notably calcifying process, making one less sensitive, more hardened

to the world.) In old age, Iris carries her various former selves with her, but they are not all equally “Iris” as she is today. Looking at a photograph of her younger self, she declares:

I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person. I am her outcome, the result of the life she once lived headlong; whereas she, if she can be said to exist at all, is composed only of what I remember. (292)

Analyzing this same passage, Gibert, referring to Paul Ricoeur’s work on memory, deems it indicative of the extent to which Iris recognizes “the high mobility of personal identity, which is never immutable or fixed in time” (Haunted, 45). The self that Iris once was – young, naïve, susceptible to the manipulations of others – exists only insofar as her memory persists within the older Iris and inasmuch as her choices have shaped Iris’s subsequent actions. With this realization, Iris dismisses Laura’s later-recalled childhood question: “*In heaven, what age will I be?*” (381), which relies instead on the idea that one might, over the course of a life, identify and access a particular manifestation of the self-in-time that is best and true.

This same question of what Linda Fisher terms “embodied temporality” – both the manner in which time is represented and given form in the body; and the manner in which our embodiment is a continuous process developing in time – and the ontological problems that it throws up, recurs in Beauvoir’s work. Concerned with what it means to grow old within a social context, Beauvoir castigates a capitalist system that calculates human value in terms of utility and productivity, in which the retired worker is thus “condemned to stagnate in boredom and loneliness, a mere throw-out” (13). For Beauvoir, committed to an existentialist philosophy of transcendence, stagnation is the ultimate declension of selfhood. As she had earlier argued in *The Second Sex*:

There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the “*en-soi*” – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions – and of liberty into constraint and contingency. (28-29)

In 1949, Beauvoir was writing against woman’s temptation to accede to patriarchal pressures to immanence: to collude in her own stagnation. Her text was concerned to undermine cultural and biological arguments that might support this acquiescence. Addressing old age twenty years later, however, she encounters new difficulties.

While *The Second Sex* sought to minimize the significance of the body (woman, she notes, is deemed circumscribed by her anatomy while man “superbly ignores” his own chemical-organic nature [15]), *Old Age* repeatedly comes up against the physical limits of the ageing body. Age, for Beauvoir, is an incontestable biological phenomenon. Change may be the essence of life, but ageing is, specifically, “an irreversible, unfavourable change; a decline” (*Old Age* 17). In old age, we find ourselves cut off from the future, stranded in the immanence of the present. Where *The Second Sex* rallied women to recognize that they were more capable than commonly perceived, *Old Age* counsels acceptance of one’s limitations if one is to avoid living “in bad faith”. Small expands on this concept: as our faculties decline with age, we must accept our growing limitations (otherwise we are living in bad faith: denying empirical truths and potentially making ourselves ridiculous), while simultaneously continuing to pursue, at a lesser intensity, the projects (relationships; causes; work) that give our lives meaning. And thus, paradoxically, a little bad faith is necessary if we are to

maintain some sense of purpose and progression and to avoid utter despair. As Small puts it, “Bad faith is the only way to keep going” (14).

Beauvoir struggles to reconcile these contradictions. As Fisher explains, the nature of embodied temporality means that we experience time as a perpetual metamorphosis. This process of constant change, while natural and inevitable, is frightening; it unsettles our sense of our self as “stable, coherent, and continuous” and has the potential to radically compromise our identity. Moreover, “the ineluctable metamorphosis transforms me into something putatively worse” (Fisher 117). For Beauvoir, committed as she is to what she terms in *The Second Sex* an “existentialist ethics” of perpetual development and transcendence – “a continual reaching out” (28) – metamorphosis (which is dynamic, which resists stagnation) leads, paradoxically, to a reduction in activities, a diminution of mental faculties and an alteration in attitude (See *Old Age* 599).¹ Consequent to this decline, one is in danger of betraying one’s former life and work, of succumbing to the temptation to “give up the struggle” (*Old Age* 600). For Fisher, implicit in this anxious narrative of alteration and betrayal is an unspoken notion of “a default ‘myself’”, which, she notes, “seems to be my younger, more attractive, healthier, more capable self: in short, the phenomenological “I can” in an all-encompassing sense, contrasted now with the “I cannot” of old age” (Fisher 118).

Beauvoir fears the diminishment wrought by old age: not so much in terms of physical deterioration, which is miserable, but intellectual degeneration, which is dreadful. In *The Blind Assassin*, Iris’s body is inarguably in decline, and is repeatedly figured as a traitorous other: “Just when you need it, just when you could use an arm or a leg, suddenly the body has other things to do. It falters, it buckles under you; it melts away as if made of snow, leaving nothing much” (380). This schism between body and self recalls Featherstone and

Hepworth's image of age as a mask concealing the true self beneath. A similar idea informs Atwood's novel, in which Iris is hostage to her failing physiology. Briefly discussing the ageing body in Atwood's fiction, Madeleine Davies similarly identifies a Cartesian dualism at work in *The Blind Assassin*, to uncanny effect:

Here the ageing body is yet another form of Cixous's "uncanny stranger on display" since Iris repeatedly states that the face and body she sees in the mirror do not seem to belong to her. This body irritates her with its disabling infirmities, and the vicious language Iris uses in relation to it is often marked by ugly images of decay and putrefaction. (67)

The discomforts and indignities of bodily ageing are not in question in *The Blind Assassin*, in which Atwood's octogenarian narrator has moved some way beyond the age-positive rhetoric of Third Age advocates. What remains to be examined, instead, is how ageing has impacted Iris's non-corporeal selfhood.

Iris changes over the course of a life; this is readily noticeable. Karen Stein, for example, notes that, as a child, 'she is stolid, practical, unquestioning', whereas the "eighty-two-year-old Iris is bitter, cynical, wryly humorous" (148). Furthermore, there are significant tensions in the text, discussed by many critics,² between the narrative authority to which Iris lays claim ("I wrote it myself" [626]) and the fact that, in a novel that highlights the vagaries of memory and the contestable nature of the documented past, the veracity of much of Iris's memoir can never be authoritatively verified. The novel, therefore, frequently foregrounds instability: of both narrative and narrator. At the same time, however, *The Blind Assassin* evinces a certain clear faith in the coherent progress of the self in time. For example, while

Iris is repeatedly subject to myriad mythic configurations of women – biblical, classical and fairy-tale – and variously defined by the roles of self-sacrificing sister, submissive wife and unfit mother that are foisted upon her, in their contradictory multiplicity, these imposed masks paradoxically work to deconstruct their own veracity, leaving in their wake an assumption by default of an essential Iris by whom these roles have been variously inhabited. In a similar vein, the apparent authorial ambiguities of Iris’s narrative actually belie a fundamental coherence. Despite her eventual acceptance of Laura’s co-authorial role, the memoir remains determinedly Iris’s own, subject only to her authorial choices, the nature of its concealments and revelations entirely under her direction. And despite her failing heart and occasional lapses of memory, Iris’s narrative voice remains coherent and secure.

In addition to asserting a strong, unified sense of self into old age, *The Blind Assassin* is also significantly optimistic about the capacity to sustain self-defining projects to the last. Rather than the abnegation of such projects, and the correlated unraveling of the self that Beauvoir so feared, in determining to finally write her revelatory memoir, Iris succeeds in actively maintaining passion, commitment and aspiration to the very end of life. Her narrative provides both purpose and pace to her final days; a final passage declares: “I have to hurry now” (607), and the present day interjections increasingly contain such self-admonishments against procrastination. With carefully orchestrated assonance, *The Blind Assassin* ties Iris’s life to her narrative, as she petitions: “Keep my leaking heart afloat for just a few more days, until I can set things in order” (607). As Iris’s body grows more feeble, the urgency of her project only increases.

In employing this trope, Atwood draws on a common impulse to conceptualize life as a progress narrative, aspiring to satisfactory resolution. This narrative metaphor, however, can

struggle to assimilate old age. As Small notes, “A long life, once it reaches old age, brings diminishing returns on one of the most important assumptions of a progress narrative: the potential richness of what lies ahead” (100). With old age, “there is no crashing revelation or denouement, simply a slow tailing off” (Small 106). And indeed, a similar persistent anxiety animates Iris’s narrative in *The Blind Assassin*. A self-reflexive memoirist, she repeatedly questions and examines the motivation to document a life, and concludes: “At the very least we want a witness. We can’t stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down” (118).

The Blind Assassin presents a narratological conundrum to its author: specifically, how to narrate beyond the expiration of the narrator. Ultimately, of course, Atwood handles this structural difficulty with characteristic ease: the final collected document in the text is Iris’s obituary, by which the reader is informed of her death, followed by the final pages of her memoir, collated, one must assume, by the hand of some shadowy editor, perhaps the granddaughter to whom the text was dedicated. Iris’s narrative, as she had hoped, clearly survives her death.

What this heavily foreshadowed conclusion does, however, is to raise questions about what it means to narrate a life to “the end”. At one point, imagining this portentous moment, which manages to be both conjectural and inevitable, Iris muses: “Time rises and rises, and when it reaches the level of your eyes you drown” (583). The fatalism of this prognosis seemingly accords with Small’s vision of old age as a “slow tailing off”: a dispiriting, linear conclusion inimical to the twists and turns of satisfactory narrative progression. Unlike, say, the kind of liminal experience of mid-life ageing that Sarah Falcus discusses in a 2013 article on Michèle Roberts, in which Falcus identifies “a progress narrative, one of sexual development and

fulfilment for a woman in midlife” (23), old age, for Iris, is not so much a “transitional space” (Falcus 23) as a terminal one. This, essentially, is the impasse against which Atwood’s novel must work: how to make the final moments – the moments that are foregone, that can offer no reprieve – as urgent, purposeful, and significant as those that have gone before. We are called on, in effect, to care about Iris in old age as much as we are drawn to care about Iris in her youth. This, I would argue, is akin to the ethical requirement that Beauvoir identified in *Old Age* when she urged her readers to imagine themselves perpetuating into the latter stages of a long life.

When Beauvoir wrote her study of ageing she was in her early sixties (as was Atwood when she published *The Blind Assassin*), and old age, while pressing closer, remained a phenomenon “seen from without” (*Old Age* 21). Cognizant of this fact and its implications, Beauvoir calls for an empathetic identification with the elderly other: “If we do not know what we are going to be,” she argues, “we cannot know what we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman” (12). For Beauvoir, this act of recognition is not just a moral but a pragmatic imperative: only by affording full and equal subjectivity to the old will we cease to be indifferent to their sufferings which will one day, as she reminds us, be our own sufferings. A text like *The Blind Assassin*, which adopts the subjective narrative perspective of an octogenarian, assists in the kind of empathetic identification that Beauvoir calls for, and which she deems to be a social good.

Iris in old age is an aggregate of past selves, from which emerges a coherent, intentional subjectivity, driven by a self-defining project that only increases in purpose and urgency as life approaches its imminent conclusion. With this, *The Blind Assassin* works to alleviate some of the anxieties that haunt Beauvoir’s text. Rather than an abnegation and betrayal of a

younger, truer self, Atwood's novel depicts old age as a purposeful culmination of a life. Like the utilitarian clock she once saw in a hotel – “*This is the time, it says, only one layer of it, there is no other*” (560) – Iris's narrative refuses to accept that any past iteration of her self is somehow more worthy, more vital or more true than the eighty-two-year-old self that now writes.

Imagining a Life: Moral Disorder

If *The Blind Assassin* works to allay anxieties regarding the unravelling of the self in old age, *Moral Disorder* presents an altogether more unsettled proposition. In this later work, an implicit sense of the fragmentary nature of the subject in time is given formal expression in the text. The underlying narrative stability and unity eventually identifiable in *The Blind Assassin* gives way, in *Moral Disorder*, to the inherently more unstable links and connections afforded by the short story cycle form that distinguishes this text in Atwood's canon. Comprising eleven short stories, each of which initially appears to be inhabited by a single unifying self, the cycle – or “story suite”, as Ursula Le Guin in her review of the book prefers to call it – requires careful attention from the reader in order to discern the nature and purpose of its seeming narrative coherence.

The collection commences with a present day account of Nell and Tig inhabiting the “*still*” and “*not yet*” of early old age (4); the next story recounts a childhood event from around 1950, presumably recalled by Nell; and each successive story proceeds to move forward in time as the narrator progressively ages. The first five stories in the collection are told in the first person by an unnamed narrator, while the next four are recounted in the third person, with the narrator identified as Nell, and the final two stories return to the unnamed first person; the fifth story, “The Other Place”, in which the unnamed narrator anticipates her

future relationship with Tig, provides a discernible link between the first and second sections. The final two seemingly conjoined stories, instead, which refer to an older brother rather than the younger sister Lizzie who has occasionally appeared in the earlier stories, seem more readily disconnected from the whole. In this concluding pair of stories, the narrator first visits her increasingly confused father as he succumbs to dementia, and then cares for her blind and largely immobile ninety-two year old mother.

Picking through the echoes and discontinuities of these episodic narratives requires of the reader a particular acuity; the text demands attention. As with *The Blind Assassin*, an initially complex structure – what Ellen McWilliams describes as a “carefully managed haphazardness” (127) – soon appears to cede a fairly orderly linear progress narrative, in which – apart from the dislocated present-day setting of the first story – a broadly coherent central protagonist chronologically recalls a life from childhood to old age. Working against this sense of cohesion, however, are the gaps between the stories; the shifting narrative perspective; the sometimes complex chronology at work within particular stories; and the occasional factual dissonance between episodes: each of which points to the disorder advertised in the collection’s title. In addition, notable parallels between the protagonist’s life and elements of Atwood’s autobiography work to disrupt the fictionality of the text. In particular, the account of the narrator’s entomologist father’s work in the Canadian wilderness, which appears in “The Boys at the Lab”, draws on a familiar autobiographical trope previously utilised in earlier texts, including *Surfacing* (1972) and *Cat’s Eye*. And finally, the stories themselves have disparate publication histories, a number of them previously appearing as autonomous stories elsewhere before being collected as *Moral Disorder*.

These elements cumulatively describe a text that both promises and resists structure and cohesion. If Nell is indeed the unifying consciousness that connects each episode, then, like Iris in *The Blind Assassin*, she appears to be a composite of disparate past selves. Unlike *The Blind Assassin*, however, *Moral Disorder* contains no orchestrating narratorial presence to bridge the text's various parts. From a conventional adolescence to a determinedly itinerant young adulthood; from a ramshackle smallholding to respectable suburbia: each iteration of "Nell" is bluntly severed from the next by a text that refuses to provide the requisite mediating passages. For Le Guin, the ensuing fractures eventually prove too substantial to sustain the whole: "The glimpses are brilliant, but the gaps are wide." Where Iris evolves in time but remains essentially and recognisably her self, in *Moral Disorder* instead, Atwood seems to provide a much less reassuring notion of a selfhood that is fragmentary, dissonant, and ultimately lacking in fundamental coherence.

That is not to say that *Moral Disorder* does not aspire to coherence. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the fragmentary nature of the allusive narrative speaks to an instinctive desire to conceive of lives as unitary and meaningful. The story cycle commences with "The Bad News", in which Nell and Tig are at their oldest in the collection, but still have capacity. As (an unnamed) Nell observes: "there are little things going wrong with us – a knee here, an eye there – but so far just little things" (4). It then segues into "The Art of Cooking and Serving", in which a similarly unnamed narrator of indeterminate age recalls scenes from her childhood. The connections at this point are unspoken and oblique, but at the same time, the book's episodic nature lends itself to a mode of life course representation in which "the passing of time is rendered orderly through a series of age-based identities" (Hockey 2003, 82) and progression is marked by key transitional moments such as leaving home, marriage, and childbirth.³ When faced with a text that supplies a series of such transitional moments,

presented in the expected order, the reader instinctively looks to do the work that would connect the episodes into a whole.

Moral Disorder, despite its gaps and absences, appears to describe the representation of a single life course. While it may lack the sense of driving purpose conferred by Iris's determination to complete her memoir before "the end", its cumulative episodes nevertheless seemingly aspire to the kind of resolution described by Erikson's psychoanalytic model of ageing, in which the ultimate stage is "ego integrity" (*Childhood* 231): an equable state of attainment and acceptance of both triumphs and disappointments. Old age, by this reckoning, is not a crashing denouement or a miserable slow decline, but rather the purposeful conclusion of a full life to which all should aspire. In tracing out a life such as Nell's, which is largely unremarkable, Atwood arguably provides a model of aging by which the successful completion of a life is marked by the kind of inner equilibrium apparently attained by the older Nell in "The Bad News", for whom "There will be other news, later. There always is. We'll worry about it when it comes" (7). Such equanimity staves off the fear of death that Erikson identifies as marking failed ego integration, whereby the dissatisfied and increasingly despairing subject rails against time, which is inevitably "too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternate roads to integrity" (*Childhood* 232). If we read *Moral Disorder* as an episodic but coherent account of a single life course, then we might be tempted to deem its proleptically narrated conclusion, in which Nell faces death with composure, instructive and comforting.

Atwood's texts, however, are not known for their comforting conclusions, and while Nell's equanimity in old age may gesture to Erikson's ego integration, the opening story, like the rest of the collection, is notably pervaded by an underlying sense of violence and threat.

Envisioned by Nell as “a huge bird, with the wings of a crow” (1), the bad news in this early instance is a political assassination in a foreign land, but “bad news” is a shifting and perennial concept; it encompasses “the explosions, the oil spills, the genocides, the famines, all of that” (7). The bad news is the bodily harm done (this time) to others. Although its ubiquity is paradoxically also its emollient (“We’ll worry about it when it comes”), there is a cumulative effect to the violence and horror recounted in *Moral Disorder*. Atwood’s stories are stories of suicide and depression in which the driving of a hand-reared lamb to slaughter – “Bludgeons. Sharp-edged tools. Knives for the throat-slitting” (158) – prefigures the return of repressed memories in an elderly real-estate agent and concentration camp survivor: “something had been stirred up; it had awakened, it had come to the surface. There was blood” (211). If Nell’s life is ultimately an ordinary life, Atwood demonstrates the manner in which such a life is shadowed at every stage by intimations of violence and death.

By commencing *Moral Disorder* on the cusp of old age, Atwood, while offering an implicit assurance that Nell and Tig will not die during the course of the narrative – that the bad news will not strike yet – nevertheless prefigures her subsequent stories of youth and midlife with a powerful *memento mori*: old age *will* come. Nell, in that early story, imagines at one point her future, widowed self, “wandering the house in the darkness, in my white nightdress, howling for what I can’t quite remember I’ve lost” (5). This stark vision of the fourth age is one of dissolution in which Nell imagines her future self as a ghost-like figure, sundered by dementia from both the past and, concomitantly, from her self. For Le Guin, “there was wisdom in not putting this story last, because the last two are about dying, the end, and this one isn’t, quite – not yet.” Instead, Atwood’s carefully orchestrated chronology positions “The Bad News” as a precarious present and the subsequent stories as a sequence of analepses. Consequently, only upon obtaining the end of the collection with “The Labrador

Fiasco” and “The Boys at the Lab” can the reader look back and reflect on the extent to which Nell’s vision of her future self, vulnerable and in mental disarray, is shaped by the experience of witnessing her parents’ decline.

In an essay that reads *Moral Disorder* as a literary contribution to ethics of care discourse, Amelia Defalco suggests that the collection describes its central female protagonist’s repeated attempts to avoid ethical responsibility and the manner in which she is persistently forced back into familial relations by the socio-cultural and gendered demands of care. From “The Art of Cooking and Serving” in which the pre-adolescent protagonist reluctantly takes charge of her baby sister, to “The Entities” in which Nell somehow finds herself responsible for Tig’s demanding ex-wife Oona, *Moral Disorder*, suggests Defalco, describes the complex negotiations involved in balancing the desire to meet the needs of others against the need to protect and sustain one’s self. As others – from close family members to relative strangers – repeatedly require of Nell her time and her attention, in a manner that is at times vociferous and exhausting, Nell struggles to attain that balance. In the final two stories however, in which Nell listens to and retells familiar narratives to her ailing parents, thereby “using storytelling to give care” (Defalco 259), Defalco identifies in Atwood’s work an uneasy resolution, answering to the obligation to give care, while, at the same time, refusing to deny the tensions and pressures (around resentment, voyeurism, power imbalances) of care-giving.

For Defalco, works of fiction such as *Moral Disorder* can provide nuanced ways of thinking through “the messiness of care” (261) that illuminate the more abstract philosophical discourse of ethics. Atwood’s text also, I suggest, functions as a contemplation of the nature of old age, and of the role of narrative in both conceptualising what it means to grow old, and in ameliorating the worst of its effects: isolation, fear, the loss of subjectivity. As Defalco

notes: “Afflicted by disease and disability, disoriented and detached from the world, the narrator’s parents continue to respond to the narratives that have made them” (259). In retelling a favorite story of a disastrous wilderness expedition in “The Labrador Fiasco”, the narrator is able to reach out and comfort her father who is increasingly anxious about heading into the unknown, unprepared; don’t worry, she tells him: “We brought the right supplies” (230). And in “The Boys at the Lab”, summoning stories from a rapidly fading past helps to sustain her mother’s subjectivity beyond the moments in which it seems to be slipping away. As she becomes increasingly frail, the mother in this final story calls to mind the poem, “My Mother Dwindles...”, from *The Door*: “I hold her hand, I whisper, / *Hello, hello.* / If I said *Goodbye* instead, / if I said, *Let go,* / What would she do?” (20) The narrator in *Moral Disorder*, however, does not say goodbye, but rather promises to remain as a witness to the last. Seemingly small comfort, this promise nevertheless recalls Iris’s similar desire for a witness in *The Blind Assassin*. It is also, eventually, the central proposition of *Moral Disorder*, which commences with a reluctance to face bad news: if bearing witness is “a form of caregiving that preserves and respects the subjectivity of the other” (Defalco 259), as Defalco argues, then it might be deemed another form of reciprocity, whereby if we hope to maintain our own subjectivity into the furthest reaches old age, it follows that we ought to begin by affording that same service to others.

Unlike the *The Blind Assassin*, which asserts a certain confidence in the coherence of subjectivity into old age, *Moral Disorder* is rather more cautious in depicting a life that is episodic, disconnected, and of uncertain unity. Certainly, the final two stories (the first of which was originally published in 1996, a full ten years before its inclusion in *Moral Disorder*), bring a particular dissonance to the story of “Nell”. At the same time, if scenes from another life story have somehow slipped between the pages of Nell’s biography, for the

reader it barely registers as more than the slightest sense of unease. This possibility – that a life story might be unwittingly invaded by pages from the life of another – goes some way to undermine any egotistical sense of a person’s uniqueness (and if, as one suspects, the interspersed narratives are actually gleaned from Atwood’s undeclared autobiography, *Moral Disorder* potentially sounds a drily self-deprecating note). Furthermore, in the absence of a driving purpose or project, such as that which defined Iris’s old age in *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood, in *Moral Disorder*, appears less confident of avoiding the dissolution of self in old age that Beauvoir feared. That early image of a future Nell, decrepit and disorientated, hangs over the text, both nightmarish and troublingly possible. In its unremarkable ordinariness, Nell’s life elicits empathy: her envisioned fate might well be ours. As she faces squarely the impending final stages of dependence, Nell – like us – can only hope that, just as she bore witness to her parents’ last days, so someone will afford her the same empathy and compassion that can only be extended in the reciprocity of selfhood.

Conclusion

Over the past five decades, a significant proportion of Atwood’s protagonists have aged in tandem with their author, and ageing has increasingly figured in her work as a thematic concern. This is readily apparent in the short stories that comprise the 2014 collection, *Stone Mattress*, which commences with an elderly protagonist struggling to get supplies in a snowstorm, and concludes on another witnessing an ageist attack on the retirement community where she lives. But even in works that less obviously address old age, the theme persists. The advances in biotechnology that drive the economy in the dystopian *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013) are largely predicated on monetizing the bodily insecurities of the “once-young, once-beautiful” (*Oryx and Crake* 55). Repeatedly in her work, Atwood demonstrates a concern with what Falcus terms “the contradictory and complex discourses around ageing

that permeate our culture” (23) and this manifests itself, specifically, in a number of works that address the troubled question of subjectivity in old age. If “The Victory Burlesk” exposes a failure to imagine the interior life of the elderly other, texts such as *The Blind Assassin* and *Moral Disorder* represent instead a concerted attempt to imaginatively inhabit old age. What Atwood shows is that this is a fraught enquiry; her reflections on old age in *The Blind Assassin* and *Moral Disorder* are not always consonant. But underpinning both is an argument, both ethical and pragmatic, for extending a reciprocity of selfhood to the ageing other who may, one day, become the ageing self.

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¹ This impasse, for Small, explains the relatively poor reception of *Old Age*; as she drily summates, quoting Beauvoir: "'It is far better not to think about it too much" (541), the philosopher (of all people) concludes" (LL, 14).

² See, just for example, Alan Robinson, Ellen McWilliams, and Magali Cornier Michael.

³ Describing these traditional markers of the life course, Jenny Hockey and Allison James note that "the contemporary western life course has, in reality, become a much more fluid endeavour" (58). With the rise of co-habitation, divorce and re-marriage, for example, getting married no longer functions as the stable, readily comprehensible marker in a life's progress that it once did.