



**From:**

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**Traces of Aging**

**Old Age and Memory in Contemporary Narrative**

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This collection consists of eight essays that examine the way narratives determine our understanding of old age and condition how the experience is lived. Contributors to this volume have based their analysis on the concept of »narrative identity« developed by Paul Ricoeur, built upon the idea that fiction makes life, and on his definition of »trace« as the mark of time. By investigating the traces of aging imprinted in a series of literary and filmic works they dismantle the narrative of old age as decline and foreclosure to assemble one of transformation and growth.

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# Introduction

## Literature that Returns to Life and the Mystique of Age

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MARTA CEREZO MORENO AND NIEVES PASCUAL SOLER

The effects of fiction, effects of revelation and transformation, are essentially effects of reading. It is by way of reading that literature returns to life, that is, to the practical and affective field of existence. (RICOEUR, *TIME AND NARRATIVE III* 101)

## LITERATURE THAT RETURNS TO LIFE

Taking as its starting point the dialectic between Paul Ricoeur's concepts of the *trace* and *narrative identity* and based on the philosopher's belief that "fiction contributes to making life" ("Life in Quest of Narrative" 20) the present volume presents eight contributions that ponder the way narratives determine our understanding of human existence especially when configured at a late stage in life.<sup>1</sup> This articulation rests upon a disruption of

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1 This volume results from the collaboration of the Center for Inter-American Studies (University of Graz), the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS) and the research project *New Critical Approaches to the Trace and the Application to Recent Literature in English* (FFI2013-44154-P) financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

conceptualizing stages of life as “limited and static categories of understanding” (Cole xviii); that is, upon challenging what it means to grow old and experience time. Positioned within the discipline of Age/Ageing Studies, we aim to make insights into the reconceptualization of the concepts of living, ageing, death, creativity, continuity and change in accordance with Ricoeur’s statement that the subject “appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life” (*Time and Narrative III* 246).

Ricoeur’s philosophical views on subjectivity are based on his idea of the dynamic circularity connecting life and narrative. To the philosopher life and stories are both recounted and lived. He believes that the process of narrative composition is only completed by the reader since on the act of reading, of interpreting, – or what he calls refiguration or mimesis<sub>3</sub> – “rests the narrative’s capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader” (“Life in Quest of Narrative” 26).<sup>2</sup> Reading is, thus, “a way of living in the fictive universe of the work” (27). To Ricoeur, the open world of the text intersects with the world of the reader creating what he calls a “horizon of experience” (26) that the reader appropriates in imagination. In this sense, stories are not just recounted, they are also lived. The intersection between life and narrative is reinforced by what Ricoeur calls the “pre-narrative structure of experience” or the conviction that experience has “a genuine demand for narrative” (29), since “life can be understood only by the stories that we tell about it” (31). Our lives are made of “story-fragments” from which a coherent narrative can be drawn out; such narrative can be “constitutive of [the subject’s] *personal identity*.” Humans, then, can be said to be “tangled up in stories” that must be unravelled, that must be recounted and, as these stories emerge, “the implied subject also emerges” and narrative identity is constituted. Therefore, Ricoeur concludes, life is

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2 In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur takes as his “guideline for exploring the mediation between time and narrative the articulation [...] between the three moments of mimesis that seriously and playfully, [he] named mimesis<sub>1</sub>, mimesis<sub>2</sub>, mimesis<sub>3</sub>” (*Time and Narrative I* 53). Mimesis<sub>1</sub>, also referred to as prefiguration, is defined as “a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character” (54). Mimesis<sub>2</sub> “opens up the world of the plot and institutes [...] the literariness of the work of literature” (53). Mimesis<sub>3</sub> “marks the intersection between the world of the text and the world of the listener or reader” (*Time and Narrative III* 159).

not just lived but also recounted and narrative fiction is consequently “an irreducible dimension of *self-understanding*” (30).

Ricoeur envisions narrative identity as constructed on the model of narrative plot with an internal dialectic of concordance and discordance that is given order and coherence by a process of emplotment.<sup>3</sup> The plot is therefore a dynamic structure, “an integrating process” which provides the story with a dynamic identity (21) by synthesizing and organizing the heterogeneous through configuration or mimesis<sub>2</sub>, that is, by mediating between multiple incidents and a unified story and by drawing a durable temporal configuration out of a succession of passing events (22). In this conception of narrative Aristotle’s notion of the “discordant concordance,” – by which, for example, the discordant nature of *peripeteia* in tragedy is in clear dialogue with the ruling concordance of the plot – is central. Ricoeur observes the same dialectic between discordance and concordance in the construction of the narrative identity of a character which mediates between permanence and change, that is, between what could be considered a concordant and unified existence that follows the ordering nature of emplotment and discordant events that rupture that seeming unity. Narrative identity is unstable and changing and, in *Time and Narrative III*, is identified by Ricoeur with a category of identity which he calls *ipse* or selfhood, understood by the philosopher as a “dynamic identity” that “can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime” (246) and that emerges by applying narrative configurations to the story of one’s life and therefore by organizing it into a “coherent and acceptable story” (247). As a consequence, by telling, reading, and also listening to one’s own experience self-knowledge is renewed. *Ipse* is in constant dialogue with what Ricoeur identifies as the other category of identity, *idem* or sameness, or a “subject identical with itself through the diversity of its different stages” – defined by the French philosopher as a “substantialist illusion” (246).

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3 “I have retained from Aristotle’s *Poetics* the central concept of emplotment, which in Greek is *muthos* and which signifies both fable (in the sense of an imaginary story) and plot (in the sense of a well constructed story). It is this second aspect of Aristotle’s *muthos* that I am taking as my guide” (Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative” 20-21).

The concept of the trace is essential in the construction of Ricoeur's narrative identity in narratives in which experience is revised by re-storying one's life and, therefore, by returning to the past. In *Time and Narrative III*, in his reflections on the relationship between the historic and narrative times, he introduces the concept of the trace. To the philosopher, history responds to the paradoxes of time phenomenology through historic time which mediates between the lived or personal experience of time and universal or cosmic time. Historic practice reinscribes time lived into cosmic time and reveals its creative capacity of time refiguration through connecting procedures that he calls *thought tools* like calendars, succession of generations, archives, documents, and, finally, traces. The source of authority of the document, Ricoeur argues, is the trace; the institutionalization of archives, the collection and conservation of documents are only possible because the past has left a mark. Therefore, to Ricoeur, history is "a knowledge by traces," which appeals "to the significance of a passed past that nevertheless remains preserved in its vestiges" (120). The trace is, consequently, "something present standing for something past" (183); it is a visible and permanent sign that denotes the presence of an absence or the presence of a passage, a term that signals the dynamics of a trace, as opposed to a mark, which implies static nature. The trace thus addresses us and "invites us to pursue it, to follow it back" (120).

In *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (2000), Ricoeur insists on the link of the trace to the past and oblivion, arguing that the destruction of traces results in an irreversible and definitive forgetfulness. The author argues that the reference to the past through traces is a paradox lodged in the origin of memory. The paradox would not exist if we only took into consideration the materiality of the presence of the trace. The dilemma arises because the trace is a mark of something which is absent, which has disappeared. "All memory is of the past" – as Aristotle points out in *Parva naturalia: On Memory and Recollection* – is, as Ricoeur states, the "loadstar for the rest of [his] exploration" (6). In his work, Ricoeur develops the Aristotelian distinction between *mnēmē*, "memory as appearing, ultimately passively, to the point of characterizing as an affection – pathos – the popping into mind of a memory" and *anamnēsis*, "the memory as an object of a search ordinarily named recall, recollection" (4). In the first case, the process of remembrance is passive, a simple evocation, that comes to our mind; the second consists of an active search. Both processes hold the



aforementioned aporia: the presence of the absence through the trace of the past and its inscription in the human memory. Plato had already linked *anamnēsis* “to a prenatal knowledge from which we are said to have been separated by a forgetting that occurs when the life of the soul is infused into a body – described, moreover, as a tomb (*sōma-sēma*) – a forgetting from birth, which is held to make the search a relearning of what has been forgotten.” Ricoeur designates recollection with the term *zētēsis*, which means searching; the rupture with the Platonic *anamnēsis* does not take place since *ana* means “returning to, retaking, recovering what had earlier been seen, experienced, or learned, hence signifies, in a sense, repetition.” Forgetting “is thus designated obliquely as that against which the operation of recollection is directed” (27). Oblivion entails the destruction of traces, the definite absence of the past in the present. The active searching for memories shows one of the main goals of the act of remembrance: “struggling against forgetting, wresting a few scraps of memory from the ‘rapacity’ of time (Augustine dixit), from ‘sinking’ into oblivion” (30). It is a way “to coat with presence the otherness of that which is over and gone. In this memory is re-presentation, in the twofold sense of *re-*: turning back, anew” (39; emphasis added).

The contributions of this volume are mostly imbricated in a double process of both *anamnēsis* and *zētēsis*. First, they work on texts that develop in manifold ways the dialectic between concordance and discordance, change and permanence, absence and presence. This dialectic takes shape through the presentation of the inner functioning of memory processes, of recollection and forgetting, of the retracing of the past. This process entails the reconfiguration of their characters’ sense of self and sense of the world they inhabit through the recovery of memory traces that trigger a re-reading and re-examination of their experiences and the constitution of their narrative identities. Second, the authors of this volume actively search for and delve into narrative traces imprinted in the works examined that invite them to *pursue them and follow them back*. The assay of these textual traces opens up different understandings of later stages of life and mostly dismantle old age as a *narrative of decline* (Gullette) or as the epitome of *narrative foreclosure* (Freeman, “Narrative Foreclosure”) – that is, old age as a concluding chapter – and, therefore, point to the fact that later stages in life can also involve a continuous unfolding of personal growth. They exemplify Freeman’s belief that old age is “the *narrative*

phase par excellence” (“Death, Narrative Integrity” 394) from which existence, considered significantly by narrative gerontologists Randall and McKim as *textistence*, can be constantly re-evaluated and rewritten.

It is in the active reading or interpretation of the narratives proposed for analysis in this volume where we find, on the one hand, what Ricoeur calls “the decisive moment of narrative identity,” and on the other hand, the space where “the notion of narrative identity encounters its limit and has to link up with the non narrative components in the formation of an acting subject” (*Time and Narrative III* 249). To Ricoeur, the reader exposes oneself to the text and “receive[s] a self enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds that interpretation unfolds.” Appropriation implies a “distantiation from oneself” or a “disappropriation of the self” that constitutes “the possibility of understanding oneself in front of the text” (*From Text to Action* 301). This entails a paradoxical situation in the process of self-constitution since narrative appropriation involves a certain degree of self-effacement and also an approach to the other through the identification with the fictional character; therefore, self-knowledge also implies learning about oneself from the other.

For Ricoeur, this space between the reader and the text, this cathartic encounter between the self and the other, is essentially ethical since narrative “is never ethically neutral, [and] proves to be the first *laboratory of moral judgment*” (*Oneself as Another* 140). Reading is “a moment of impetus” that moves the reader to self-knowledge but also to ethical action. By entering the various *horizons of experience* that the world of the text provides through the configuration of the other’s narrative identity, the reader reads him/herself,<sup>4</sup> re-evaluates his/her inner and outer worlds and is invited to acknowledge his/her ethical responsibility: “Still it belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multiple

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4 “You know what importance I attach to the relation between text and reader. I always like to quote the beautiful text of Proust in *Time Regained*: ‘But to return to myself, I thought more modestly of my book, and one could not exactly say that I thought of those who would read it, of my readers. Because they would not according to me be my readers, but the real readers of themselves, my book being only like one of those magnifying glasses offered to a customer by the optician at Combray. It was my book, and thanks to it I enabled them to read what lay within themselves’” (Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity” 198).

proposals of ethical justice brought forth by reading” (*Time and Narrative III* 249).

It is the purpose of this volume to present readings that intersect the world of the text with the world of the reader and that, through a process of refiguration of the narrative structures of that text, reveal the different horizons of experience that they encompass. The configurations of the eight narratives that are at stake are not ethically neutral and propose new ways of relating to the experience of growing old. We believe that the readings are in themselves initiations of action and change in relation to the culturally constructed views of later stages of the life course that socially displace individuals who are growing old. The readers’ encounter with the ageing characters that inhabit the novels and film that are studied in the following pages is also an encounter with an other whose narrative identity helps the authors of the articles and us, their readers, to reflect on what human existence is about. In this sense, literature, as Ricoeur inspiringly states, returns to life.

## THE MYSTIQUE OF AGE

In *Oneself as Another* Paul Ricoeur asserts that narratives have “a role to play in the apprenticeship of dying”: they relieve our fear of “the unknown” (162). We should add that narratives also have a role to play in the apprenticeship of growing old: they relieve our fear of what we do not want to know, that is, the loss of others and our own death. In *The Fountain of Age* Betty Friedan refers to this denial of knowledge as the “age mystique” (33). Because old age is perceived as a problem we “never face the real problems that keep us from evolving” and alienate ourselves from “the actuality of our own experience” (62). Images of those “who can no longer ‘pass’ as young” are removed from memories and from sight. Segregated from society “in senior citizens’ ‘retirement homes’ or nursing homes from which, like concentration camps, they will never return” (41), old people are denied, making age even more terrifying. Some contributors to this book offer alternatives to the mystique of age by looking at this stage of our lives as a transformation, a paradigm shift, a growth. Others examine narratives wherein the old feel cheated by life but determined to blockade

fear. All of them confront the new realities of age through the particular narratives of individual old people ready to know.

In “Keeping Appointments with the Past: Time, Place, and Narrative Identity in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*,” Anna MacDonald investigates how physical places flood the imagination with images of the past through W. G. Sebald’s final prose work, *Austerlitz* (2001). After Jacques Austerlitz, at the age of four and a half (in 1939), is forced to abandon Germany and emigrate to England, he represses all the memories that form his identity. Upon retiring from his teaching job at a London institute of art history, his defences break down and the repressed returns to his conscious mind. It is when he begins to remember that Austerlitz feels reborn, as if he had resurrected into life “almost on the eve of [his] death,” (193) writes Sebald. This personal resurrection does not originate in the narcissistic desire to survive one’s death but is born in accepting finitude and renouncing the consolation of eternity. And yet, the return, MacDonald argues, cannot be the ground for renewal lest memories are turned into words and life is reconfigured in narrative. So, in order to formulate his narrative identity and fill what MacDonald describes as “the void of missing, repressed or otherwise traumatizing personal as well as cultural memories,” Austerlitz decides to travel to Prague, Terezín and Paris. In the Liverpool Street Station, the new Bibliothèque Nationale and the Antikos Bazar “individual and collective memories come together,” reinforcing each other.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur brings together architectural spaces “and that space unfolded by our corporeal condition” (150). Crucial to memory, he notes, is habitation: “the memory of having inhabited some house in some town or some part of the world are particularly eloquent and telling” (148). While the protagonist of Sebald’s text travels to a world he does not know, Iris Chase, the eighty-two year old narrator of Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*, revisits Avilion, her grandmother Adelia’s Victorian mansion where she grew, to remember what has been forgotten. Teresa Gibert in “Haunted by a Traumatic Past: Age, Memory and Narrative Identity in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*” studies the places of memory in Atwood’s Booker Prize-winning novel (published when the author was sixty-one) within the conceptual framework of Ricoeur’s theory of habitation. Perceptively, among these places she includes the text of the romance entitled “The Blind Assassin” itself, “a literary memorial,” as Gibert describes it in honour of Iris’s sister, Laura,

that keeps her remembrance alive and available, and “an act of atonement” for the offences of her remembered selves.

Also delving into sensual memory and literature as atonement is the essay “‘The whole aspect of age is full of possibilities!’: Traces of Ageing, Memory, and Sexuality in Daphne du Maurier’s ‘Don’t Look Now’” by Marta Miquel-Baldellou. It is to Venice, though, where Daphne du Maurier travels so as to come to terms with the deaths of her close friend Gertrude Lawrence and her husband Frederick Browning. As a result she writes “Don’t Look Now,” a short story where a couple goes on a trip to the Repubblica Serenissima to forget the demise of their young daughter. There they encounter two old dwarf twins who force the couple to face their suffering. Miquel-Baldellou argues that “the twins become ageing doubles of the protagonists of the story” and, significantly, replicate “the death of the author’s literary persona.” Miquel-Baldellou examines du Maurier’s obsession with the decline of old age and the way it impacted her writing using Ricoeur’s theories on narrative identity, imagination, and time. Throughout the development of her argument, she raises two other issues. One relates to the gothic mode in which the experience of loss is conveyed. Concerned as it is with death and the dissolution of identity, the gothic – she sustains – jeopardises the will to forget the past that dominates these parents. The other concerns the literary connotations of decay attached to the city of Venice and how its maze of labyrinthine streets circulate, haunt and move characters and author to emotional turmoil.

The limits of Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity are probed by Rahel Rivera Godoy-Benesch in “Ageing, Agency, and Autobiography: Challenging Ricoeur’s Concept of Narrative Identity.” In Ricoeur’s view, the assertion of identity in narrative relies on personal agency, the exercise of which depends on what Rivera Godoy-Benesch calls “a functioning mind” and the continuity of memory. Old age, however, is characterised by physical decline across all sensory systems which in turn causes a decrease of mind activity and, ultimately, of agency. Drawing on Stephen G. Post, who denounces the value of promoting reason at the cost of emotions in our society, the author calls for a new kind of narrative identity based not on “the agency of the mind” but on the capacity to feel and the sensual nature of memory. Through this lens she reads two short stories by John Barth (“Peeing Tom” and “Assisted Living,” collected in *The Development*,

2008) and Joan Didion's autobiographies *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and *Blue Nights* (2011).

It is the discontinuity of memory and the continuity of narrative that concerns Pamela Gravagne in "An Appetite for Life: Narrative, Time, and Identity in *Still Mine*," but her treatment of the topic differs from Godoy-Benesch's. In the film *Still Mine* (2013), directed by Michael McGowan, an old man fights against local authorities in rural New Brunswick to build a new home for his wife, affected by dementia, and himself because the house they live in no longer meets their needs. Through Craig Morrison's determination to continue building in spite of official regulations, Gravagne illustrates Ricoeur's determination to honour life by living up to death with what Olivier Abel calls "the grace of insouciance" (xiii). The posthumously published *Living Up to Death*, a collection of sketches written by Ricoeur in the last years of his life, supports the claim that his "insouciance" for life involves both the agony of effacing oneself or the suffering of self-detachment and the cheerfulness of letting go of oneself. His conception reflects the influences of Spinoza's faith on remaining alive to the end, Aristotle's anthropology of human vulnerability and Kant's obsession with an afterlife. Using these hermeneutic tools Gravagne shows that by building a home Craig builds a life message that, she writes, "enriches and enlarges, rather than diminishes, our idea of self and story as we grow older."

The theme of dementia is tackled by Sara Strauss in "Memory, Dementia and Narrative Identity in Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain.'" In this short story the Nobel Prize-winning Canadian author narrates the development of Alzheimer's disease in Fiona and her husband's fight with the sickness. In Strauss's words, the article shows "how Munro's narrative, which is told from Grant's point of view, deals with the all-embracing effects of memory loss on the patients' and their relatives' lives and illustrates the relatives' struggle to comprehend the changes of identity dementia entails." Following upon the ethical functions of narratives theorised by Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative III* and his view of identity as a structure of self-constancy that nevertheless includes change, Strauß concludes by reflecting on the need of readers to empathise with the plight of others so as to reconfigure our identity and change behaviours.

For his part, Francisco Collado-Rodríguez looks into the narrativity of death in "Horror Mortis, Structural Trauma, and Postmodern Parody in Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*" but from a different perspective than

Ricoeur. He analyses Eugene Henderson's trauma of death at the core of his old age using Sigmund Freud's account of dream-interpretation and Joseph Campbell's myth archetypes. Collado-Rodríguez concludes that Bellow manipulates the traces of the past by parodying modernist symbols and that it is through this ridiculous imitation that the American writer transcends the logic of narrative closure. It is perhaps appropriate, given the intent of this volume, to read the alternative focus underlying this essay in light of Ricoeur's philosophy of the symbol to which he turns his attention in *The Symbolism of Evil*. At the end of the book the French philosopher sums up his task thus:

The task of the philosopher, guided by symbols would be to break out of the enchanted closure of consciousness of oneself, to end the prerogative of self-reflection [...] symbols [and] myths [...] speak of the situation of man in the being of the world. The task, then, is starting from the symbols, to elaborate existential concepts – that is to say, not only structures of reflection but structures of existence – insofar as existence is the being of man. (356-57)

Henderson was unable to develop the existential concepts he needed to face the birth of death. Not so Bellow who, in the words of Collado-Rodríguez, forces “in his readers ideological reflections on [the] present” which help organise the postmodern structure of existence in an intelligible manner.

This volume ends with an essay on autobiography and the narration of one's life into old age. Ángeles de la Concha explores Doris Lessing's impulse to tell her story in her novels, from the pentalogy *Children of Violence* which saw the light in 1952 to *The Sweetest Dream*, published in 2001, when she turned eighty-three. As to the choice of fiction to explain Lessing's experiments in life-writing, de la Concha sides with Ricoeur when he claims that, “It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organise life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or from history” (*Oneself as Another* 162). In this understanding, she argues that for Lessing old age is a privileged position from which to organise her identity, rework unsolved matters, heal the wounds open since childhood and, in sum, live the “good life” she dreamed of.

Contributors to this book deal with the dialectics of ageing and agency, concordance and discordance, narrative and life, time and space, trace and erasure, memory and oblivion, continuity and discontinuity. They base their studies on the theories of Paul Ricoeur, which are used to explain differences across life experiences and similarities in narrative structures. Through the various traces of aging that the authors of this volume discover in the stories of old age that they tell, it aims to help untangling the dynamic identities that can be hold in later stages of life.

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