SCHWEIZER ANGLISTISCHE ARBEITEN
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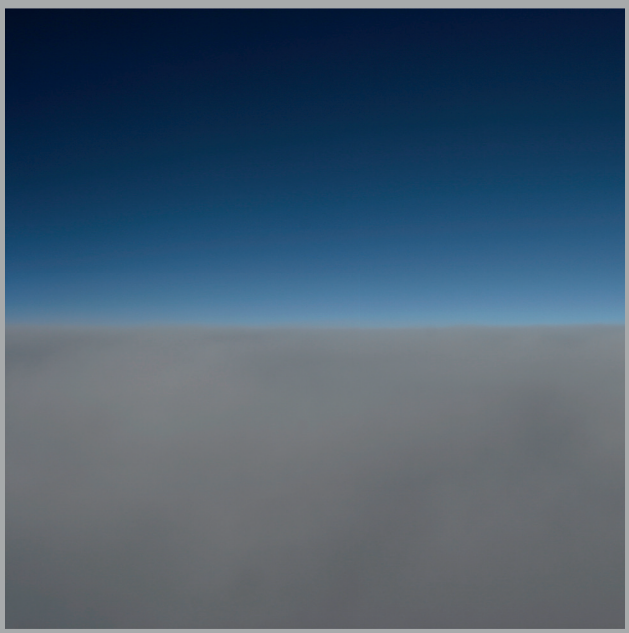
Rahel Rivera Godoy-Benesch

The Production of Lateness

Old Age and Creativity in Contemporary Narrative



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Schweizer Anglistische Arbeiten
Swiss Studies in English

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Life is full of coincidences, and one of them was meeting Linda and Michael Hutcheon during a colloquium in Zurich. They spontaneously invited me to participate in a late-life creativity workshop with Gordon McMullan, David Amigoni, Sam Smiles, Amir Cohen-Shalev, and many other ageing-studies scholars, as well as ageing artists themselves. A further key event was a captivating lecture on Beethoven's late style by Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen, which I only became aware of thanks to one of my students. Very probably, none of these

scholars remembers me but they unknowingly contributed to the way I have come to think about lateness.

Finally, there is my family: my children Daniel, Anna, Isabel, and Celia, who tolerated my long absences with patient understanding. My parents helped out whenever they were needed, cooking countless meals and taking the children for day trips and holidays. I feel blessed to have them in my life.

Speak now before it is too late,
and then hope to go on speaking
until there is nothing more to be said.
Time is running out, after all.

Paul Auster, *Winter Journal*

1 Introduction: Approaching Late-Life Creativity in Literature

> It is most true, *stylus virum arguit*, our stile bewraies us, and as Hunters find their game by the trace, so is a mans Genius descried by his workes.
>
> (Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* 13, original italics)

1.1 Old Age, the Age of Style

This study explores artists' creative practice in old age. However, it does not, as one might expect, investigate the three authors of the texts under scrutiny, John Barth, Karen Blixen, and Joan Didion. Authors are persons of flesh and blood who write and publish works; besides that, they have families and friends, daily household routines, worries and reasons to be joyful. In their families, they may be good or bad or average parents and spouses; to their friends, they may be close confidants or merely good for an occasional chat. They may like going for a walk on a sunny Sunday afternoon, cry over a sentimental movie, or get annoyed at politics. In their works, however, these authors make their appearance as *artists*. This is not to say that, when authors write, they take on a different, altogether fictional identity, disguising 'who they really are' (some may do so, some may not – as some might or might not let their spouses or children or friends know 'who they really are'). Rather, it is placing emphasis on the fact that writing a text means making a number of decisions, and one of these decisions is how to *appear* as the originator of the work: what tone to adopt, what qualities to foreground or suppress, what stance to take, and certainly not least, what style to use. In other words, ageing authors, as any other author, choose how to *inscribe their creative agency* in the text, and they do so through their style. Susan Sontag affirms: "Style is the principle of *decision* in a work of art, the signature of the artist's *will*. And as the human will is capable of an indefinite number of stances, there are an indefinite number of possible styles for works of art" ("On Style" 37, italics added). In this sense, therefore, the Latin aphorism

stilus virum arguit rings true. Yet, what does a style consist of, and *how* does it construct the image of the ageing artist? These questions shall be explored here. The present study thus aims to provide a method for reading the textual image of the ageing artist. The significance of this image extends beyond the biography of individual authors. Indeed, it will become clear that it strikes at the very core of the current 'hot topics' of ageing studies.

Creativity and questions of style are serious concerns for ageing authors, arguably more serious ones than for young or middle-aged writers. Since the mid-nineteenth century, a scholarly debate has developed, evaluating the stylistic performance of elderly artists with a particularly critical eye (Amigoni and McMullan 377). Due to "a profound shift of critical focus from genre to creative artist" in romanticism, the biography of the artist suddenly became relevant for the assessment of the work, and the critical concept of 'lateness' emerged (378). Within this development, the terms 'late style' and 'old-age style,' which owe their semantic and conceptual origin to German *Spätstil* and *Altersstil*, came to refer to the manner in which ageing artists are believed to shape their creative products, often in obvious divergence from their customary style in earlier works (Zanetti 302).

Such a change of the formal means of creative production in old age can be assessed in different ways. First and foremost, it has traditionally been viewed as *decline* (Painter 2). The culturally dominant stereotype of the stages of a human life consists of a so-called peak-and-decline model (Smiles 17). As depicted in numerous illustrations of the 'ages of man' (see e. g. Cole and Edwards 260), human beings are supposed to have reached their physical and social zenith in middle age and then begin their descent towards frailty, physical and mental decay, and, finally, death. The pattern was subsequently transferred to artists' work, forming the expectation that old age would inevitably leave its imprint on the creative product, which was consequently perceived as less skillfully shaped (Cohen-Shalev, "Old Age Style" 22; Smiles 17).[1] This belief persisted and made it through almost two centuries into the present: as Nicholas Delbanco (an ageing writer himself) explains, "[t]here's no obvious reason why […] writ-

1 The pervasiveness of the peak-and-decline model can be illustrated with a short anecdote: At a workshop on late-life creativity, I met seventy-three-year-old Jane Manning, one of the very few female aged opera singers worldwide. Manning, after giving a taste of her famous interpretation of Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, said that, no matter how well she performed, critics would always bring age-related decline into the picture. If her performance was not as convincing as usual, they would blame it on her age; if she excelled, they would suspiciously ask why she still sang so good at her age.

ers can't improve with age – but it's the rule, not exception, that most of the important work transpires early on" (17). This negative view of late-life creativity currently coexists with an alternative concept that emerged in the early twentieth century: the exceptionalist take. Since it was observed that very few artists – notably Goethe, Monet, and Beethoven (Zanetti 61; 322) – at an advanced age still wrote, painted, and composed with exceptional skill, these great masters were believed to transcend the biological limitations to which mere mortals were subject. Hence, late style was increasingly linked to achievement and even genius (McMullan and Smiles, Introduction 2; Smiles 19–20).

For elderly authors, the late-style debate in art criticism determines to a certain extent how their works will be received, and the choice of a certain style is thus not simply one decision among others for them. Whereas promising younger authors, if they fail to hit the mark with one of their works, may still unfold their full potential at a later stage, in the case of the elderly artist, no such positive development is usually expected. In his essay "The Look of Others," Jean Améry notes that an elderly person is "a creature without potentiality" in society's perception: "People ask no longer: What will you do?" Rather, they will say: "*This* is what you have already done" (65, original italics).[2] To be old means to be at the end: of life and of artistic progress. From this, it follows that elderly authors must make a special effort to shape their late works, as each new publication could terminate their career.

Links between late works and a supposed artistic ability on the part of their aged authors are sought by scholars as well as by the general audience; however, making connections between art and artists is fraught with complexities. Some of its implications are hinted at in the introductory quote by Robert Burton, whose expansion of the Latin aphorism provides ample material to illustrate the problems at hand. John B. Bamborough, in his introduction to the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, is right to state that it is "a matter for argument" whether Burton believed that "'the style is the man'" (xxxvi), as already Burton's choice of words raises some questions: "*Stylus virum arguit*, our stile bewraies us," he writes, "and as Hunters find their game by the trace, so is a mans Genius descried by his workes" (13, original italics).[3] Burton thus translates the Latin verb '*arguit*'

2 My own translation from German. The original passage reads: "[Der Mensch] findet sich […] als Geschöpf ohne Potentialität. Niemand fragt ihn mehr: Was wirst du tun? Alle stellen fest, nüchtern und unerschütterlich: *Das* hast du schon getan" (Améry 65, original italics).

3 "Stylus" is incorrect in contemporary Latin spelling; "stilus" is therefore used when not directly quoting from Burton.

with 'to bewray,' which is a telling choice. Whereas the straightforward meaning of Latin '*arguō*' is to "show, reveal, demonstrate, prove," thus expressing a neutral connection between the sign (*stilus*) and its referent (*virum*), further meanings include "to bring charge against," "to prove guilty," "to prove wrong […]," and "to find fault with, condemn, blame, criticize" ("arguō"). By contrast, 'to bewray' has almost exclusively negative denotations, ranging from "to accuse," "to expose," and "to divulge" to "unintentionally [revealing] what is intended to conceal" ("bewray"). An artist's style is thus a double-edged sword, as it may not only reveal one's genius (Burton 13), but it could also be turned *against* the artist. Art critics, the "Hunters [who] find their game by the trace," to slightly twist Burton's statement,[4] will certainly be inclined to do the latter with ageing authors, unless their genius becomes particularly visible in the work.

In other words, style is the Achilles heel of the ageing artist, a fact of which elderly authors are keenly aware. Based on the discourses of the late-style debate, they expect negative responses to their late work, which consequently produces washback on their texts: the way in which authors employ stylistic devices may thus be geared towards avoiding certain reactions rather than style being a direct expression of the authors' own preferences. Just as Burton, apprehensive of his readers' bias and anticipating their possible "censure" (13–14), would "insistently draw attention to [the work's] own idiosyncracies" (Bamborough xxxvi), ageing authors shape their style with a critical audience in mind. The fear of being dismissed as an artist with declining creative powers makes itself felt in a consistent highlighting of the work's form. This has to be taken into account when reading late works.

The fact that authors are wary of the scholarly context in which their works will be received becomes particularly evident in a type of novel or short story which will here be called a *late-style narrative*. Late-style narratives portray an elderly artist figure – an either fictional, historical, or (semi-)autobiographical character – in his or her search for a new style that will suit the condition of old age. Late style shall thus be at the service of expressing the artist's ageing self. Yet, the idea that style functions as an aid to old-age identity covers only one aspect of its purposeful use in the late-style narrative. Just as meaningful are the direct connections these narratives establish with the scholarly late-style debate. Constant references to this debate – the use of terms relating to lateness is just

4 In a footnote, Burton attributes the statement "as Hunters find their game by the trace, so is a mans Genius descried by his workes Stylus" to Justus Lipsius; yet, Lipsius's Latin original, "*[u]t venatores feram è vestigio impresso, virum scriptiunculâ*," (Burton 13, original italics), does not contain any reference to genius.

one indicator[5] – make it evident that late style is no natural, biographical phenomenon in these works. As Amigoni and McMullan observe, late style "is arguably more of a cultural invention than a natural phenomenon" (378). If an artist's style changed naturally as an effect of his or her advanced age, this might show in certain characteristics of his or her writing, such as fragmentariness, abstraction, or resistance to closure,[6] but hardly in explicit references to the concept of late style. Hence, the late-style narrative is a *direct engagement with late-style theory*. Ageing authors, in anticipation of the possibly negative reception of their late work, criticize and undermine the fixed conventions of late-style theory, offering their own, *artistic alternative* in literary form.

1.2 Theorizing the Elderly Artist

Current literary criticism is marked by a profound dearth of artist- and creativity-related studies. The formalist and structuralist movements of the twentieth century, rejecting romantic notions of artistic genius, purposefully excluded authors and their intentions, locating the authority over the text's meaning in its reception. As Roland Barthes famously stated, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" ("The Death" 148). Hence, if one wishes to theorize the elderly author and describe his or her creative processes in order to gain insight into artistic lateness, one first needs to engage with the scholarly discourse that has traditionally opposed such an author-centered approach.

The production of a late style is primarily dependent on its clear distinction from an author's earlier stylistic performance. For this reason, late texts often exhibit references to former works by the same author (Zanetti 321; Taberner 195). This is a unique opportunity for critics interested in studying creative processes and exploring the connection between authors and their texts. For, if authors use their own works as intertexts in their late texts, they accentuate their identity as producers of their oeuvre, challenging the borderline between life and art. As a consequence, the late work itself, by way of referencing its author and its sibling texts, defies the idea of autonomous art. It is no longer

5 The protagonist of John Barth's *The Development*, for instance, refers to his own "Late Period" and even capitalizes the term in order to emphasize its existence as a theoretical concept (89).

6 In late-style theory, there are those universalist approaches that consider late style to have fixed characteristics (cf. Smiles 18). However, as many others argue (e.g. McMullan, Hutcheon and Hutcheon, and Hutchinson), this is a critical construct rather than a natural phenomenon. In Chapter 2, a detailed discussion of universalist versus individualist approaches will be provided.

protected by a frame that traditionally "distinguishes art from non-art, provides it with the appearance of autonomy" and marks the boundary between art and life as intransitable (Cronk par. 1).[7] The narrative itself thus motivates a reading that should include the author, a *biographical* reading. To read biographically, however, does not mean to naïvely project the artist's life circumstances onto the work, nor does it suggest that one should embrace the idea of a naturally produced late style. Rather, it means taking into account the fact that "writing, art, and musical composition in later life" are determined by a system of "social and cultural complexities" (Amigoni and McMullan 378). In other words, since elderly artists do not create artistic products in a social, cultural, and biographical vacuum, we can assume that their own old age, as well as the cultural stereotypes about old age, influence their work. Late-style narratives foreground the social and scholarly discourses about ageing and creativity within which the texts operate *and* within which their authors' creative practice has taken place. Readers are therefore *encouraged* to include these discourses in their interpretation of the texts.

Going a step further in exploring the boundary between author and text, one may approach late-style narratives as *social acts of communication*. As Umberto Eco states in his very own late work, ironically titled *Confessions of a Young Novelist*, the idea of authors *not* writing for their audience is a myth:

> I do not belong to that gang of bad writers who say that they write only for themselves. The only things that writers write for themselves are shopping lists, which help them to remember what to buy, and then can be thrown away. All the rest, including laundry lists, are messages addressed to somebody else. They are not monologues; they are dialogues. (29)

Yet, analyzing literary works as messages from their authors seems to violate the accepted methods of literary criticism. The formalist and structuralist movements around the middle of the twentieth century were largely successful in excluding the author from the study of literature, which has been decisive in counteracting intentionalism and in establishing literary criticism as an empirical endeavor, modeled after the ideal of the 'objective' natural sciences. Wimsatt and Beardsley's 1946 essay "The Intentional Fallacy" is still one of the most important milestones of the Anglo-American formalist movement. The two critics' argument that "the design and intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (468)

7 Rip Cronk, in his essay "The Pseudo-Autonomy of Art," refers specifically to the framing of a painting by curators in art galleries and museums (as opposed to more lifelike street art, e. g. graffiti).

was made in response to a then outdated idea of artistic quality in the sense of "classical 'imitation'" (468), according to which a poem was successful if its author had achieved what he or she had *intended* (468–469). Hence, Wimsatt and Beardsley opposed a view that considered literature to be a craft dependent on the author's skills, and the finalized work the product of an authorial plan. Clearly, literary criticism has moved beyond these ideas. With Roland Barthes' 1967 essay "The Death of the Author," at the very latest, it was made clear that the author had no say in the interpretation of his or her work: "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142). Denying the text's possible social and communicative function, Barthes transfers the authority over the text's meaning from the author to the reader (148). However, without the idea of an author as the originator of the work, it has also become almost impossible to explore questions of literary creativity.

The disregard of the authors and their intentions in the composition of the work can sometimes take almost absurd forms, as an example involving the elderly Philip Roth shows. The incident, which was later to be called the 'Anatole Broyard controversy,' began with several critics and reviewers suggesting that Roth had shaped Coleman Silk, the protagonist in his novel *The Human Stain*, after the literary editor Anatole Broyard, who, being of black origin, had passed as white early in his life, just as the fictional Silk had (cf. Kakutani; Moore). These claims made their way into the Wikipedia entry relating to *The Human Stain* (where they have since been partly adjusted). In the fall of 2012, Roth published "An Open Letter to Wikipedia" in *The New Yorker*, declaring that he did not know of Broyard's racial background when writing the novel and that the character of Coleman Silk was actually inspired by a friend of his, Melvin Tumin. He further reported how he had "petitioned Wikipedia to delete the misstatement" but was reminded by the Wikipedia administrator that the author "was not a credible source" and that they "require[d] secondary sources" (Roth, "An Open Letter" par. 2). Roth's open letter triggered further responses, among them a Facebook post by the late Anatole Broyard's daughter, Bliss Broyard, who wrote: "I think it's completely reasonable that Roth should be allowed to have the last word on who inspires his characters. But I don't think it's reasonable that Roth gets to dictate what conclusions other people draw about his characters" (Gupta). Her post was subsequently taken up in a web article by the *Salon* Media Group under the title: "Does Philip Roth Know What Inspired His Novel?" (Gupta). What these events show is that there are two different ways to 'dictate conclusions.' On the one hand, there is an author trying to assert his alleged

right to the novel's interpretation (Roth's open letter is 10 pages long and delivers a number of interpretive imperatives), which is certainly problematic. On the other hand, however, there is Wikipedia, a powerful tool in building public knowledge, and other public media, which deem authors generally less credible than critics and do not even grant them an opinion with regard to their own creative processes.

Thus, we seem to have arrived at a point in literary criticism where authors have definitively lost jurisdiction over their works. However, in the discussion of *late* works, these rules, which go back to Wimsatt and Beardsley's as well as Barthes' views, can be stretched somewhat. Barthes' theory was developed for a very specific approach to literature. As he suggests, "a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself" ("The Death" 142). If we look at literature from this point of view – and Barthes certainly deems this the only valid point of view – "the voice loses its origin [and] the author enters into his own death" (142). Yet, when one considers an elderly author's late work as *making a statement* of lateness, it does "act […] directly on reality" (142), as it directs a message at the author's audience. Such a work constitutes less "the very practice of the symbol itself" (142) than a gesture by its author to reveal him- or herself to the public. As Sontag asserts, "[a]rt is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary *on* the world" ("On Style" 26, original italics).

For ageing studies, moreover, recognizing the communicative function of late works is essential: if one wishes to counteract ageism and resist the stereotype of the peak-and-decline model in art criticism, one must acknowledge elderly authors' *artistic agency*. Thus, with this 'resuscitation of the author,' authorial intention re-enters the debate – not to be used by critics in order to determine the literary work's quality or success (Wimsatt and Beardsley have amply shown that this is vulnerable to fallacy), but as a genuine attempt on the part of the critic to understand the ageing author's message. Frédéric Regard, in "The Ethics of Biographical Reading," argues that biographical texts in fact "engage […] the *ethical stance* of the interpreter" (396, original italics). If one "shies away from the possibility that there might be something like a 'truth,'" this "bars the possibility of ethical interpretation" (396). The reader's engagement with the work's *intended* meaning, as it is inscribed in the text, is thus closely linked to ethical values, amongst them the respect and appreciation for the author's personal agency. In short, biographical reading means counteracting the invisibility of the elderly artist and securing a space for old-age art.

Hence, disregarding the author of a text may be a productive practice in literary criticism; yet, within ageing studies, silencing the ageing artist is ethically problematic and it runs counter to the field's anti-ageist agenda. Overcoming this dilemma is one of the core difficulties in the intersection of literary criticism and ageing studies. Over the last two decades (and as a somewhat delayed result of the cultural turn in the social sciences), a new field of ageing studies, called *cultural gerontology*, has emerged (Twigg and Martin, "The Field" 1), of which *literary gerontology* is a branch (Falcus 54–56). Social gerontology has recently experienced considerable growth and popularity, "[c]hang[ing] the ways in which we study later years, challenging old stereotypes and bringing new theories, new methodologies, and new forms of political and intellectual engagement to bear" (Twigg and Martin, "The Field" 1). Yet, its interdisciplinary approach has also led to methodological difficulties. Moreover, the danger looms large that the humanities' focus on discourse may result in the "loss of a sense of the social and underlying reality" (6). These problems are particularly visible in literary gerontology. On the one hand, there are more sociologically oriented studies, which equate the content of a literary work with social reality and thus pay little attention to issues of textuality, consequently not living up to the methodological standard of literary criticism. On the other hand, a strictly literary approach with an exclusive focus on textuality cannot fully endorse ageing studies' social and political agenda. The realm of art seems too far removed from reality. This conflict cannot be completely solved. Yet, what Sarah Falcus views as an asset of literature itself could also be considered a strength of literary gerontology: "It is the ability to accommodate and even thrive on contradiction, incompleteness and possibility" (53). In this sense, it is precisely the field's most contradictory areas, such as methodologically complex questions of authorship and authorial agency, that may turn out to be particularly fruitful for the field of ageing studies.

One of the aims of the present study is therefore to make a contribution to literary gerontology in providing a methodologically viable approach to late literary works: one that should be able to encompass the political agenda of ageing studies, on the one hand, and respect the tenets of text-based literary criticism, on the other. Nonetheless, the risks involved in embracing "the openly political drive" of literary gerontology (Falcus 54) should not be underestimated. Critics must be careful not to blatantly subordinate their interpretation of literary texts to their ideological aims. An ideological orientation is justified, however, if its design is geared towards avoiding an *ageist methodology*. Falcus notes in agreement with Helen Small:

> Despite the wealth of literary texts that explore and present ageing across the life course, […] literary critics very rarely take ageing as a focus of their work: "Old age in literature is rarely if ever only about itself – but as far as criticism has been concerned, it has oddly rarely been about itself at all." (Small 6, qtd. in Falcus 53)

Hence, the most noticeable bias in literary criticism has been the field's *neglect* of old age as a category. Late-style narratives consistently emphasize elderly artists' struggles to make their art compatible with their advanced age; if critics ignore the theme of old age in these narratives, they *misrepresent* the literary text. Likewise, in narratives that draw attention to their producer's age, the critical approach should not disregard the author's status as an elderly artist – even less so because creativity studies have mainly been concerned with youth (Smiles 16–17) and thus created an additional age bias. Hence, adopting an anti-ageist agenda in literary studies means critically examining the methods of textual analysis as well as the cultural paradigms and age stereotypes on which these are based. In order to resist such stereotyping, critics should attempt to discover what the ageing artists themselves express *through and about* their creative processes. "Art is seduction, not rape," Sontag states, yet "art cannot seduce without the complicity of the experiencing subject" ("On Style" 27). Hence, even with an anti-ageist agenda, the literary work, the object of study, should be at the center of the investigation.

1.3 Late-Style Narratives in Context

Methodology begins with the selection of the literary texts to be analyzed. The three late works chosen for this study, John Barth's collection *The Development*, Karen Blixen's short story "Echoes," and Joan Didion's autobiographical novel *Blue Nights*, are works whose formal structures reflect the ways in which the late-style debate has shaped late art and cultural images of ageing artists alike. The choice of these three works is not representative of the bulk of late contemporary literature; nor are the narratives fully representative of their individual authors' late phases. Every text an author writes may present a different artist-persona, and the aim of this study is not to provide a holistic approach. Rather, the three works are suitable for this study because they exemplify some key aspects of the late-style debate and their effects. John Barth, as a theoretical and parodist writer, has the ability to make existing formal structures visible, highlighting the way in which the *medium itself* determines the late work. Karen Blixen is an unconventional writer who transcends boundaries of nation, lan-

guage, and literary period. Her deeply personal and symbolic writing foregrounds the pervasive *social paradigms* that shape late art, especially with regard to questions of gender. Joan Didion, finally, is the one who best exemplifies the *contact between artists and the public*. Moreover, not only is she a strong stylist who has always explicitly commented on her stylistic choices, but she arguably also records universal experiences in her writing. This group of texts thus also exemplifies the dilemma each late-style critic has to face and to which there is no definitive solution: whether or not to close the gap between the individual and the universal – that is, whether to extend the insights into a specific text to late-life creativity in general.

The **core thesis** proposed here is a general one: it argues that the theoretical focus on late style in art history, musicology, and philosophy around the middle of the twentieth century has had a decisive impact on elderly authors' artistic production, and that these authors, in an act of dissidence, now 'write back' to the theoretical authority that has tried to define them. Using Alan Sinfield's term, one can call such dissident works "faultline stories," narratives which "address the awkward, unresolved issues" and "negotiate the faultlines that distress the prevailing conditions of plausibility" (47). According to Sinfield, these narratives call for a political criticism that examines their social parameters, and, more specifically, for textual analysis:

> The reason why textual analysis can so readily demonstrate dissidence being incorporated is that dissidence operates, necessarily, with reference to dominant structures. It has to invoke those structures to oppose them, and therefore can always, ipso facto, be discovered reinscribing that which it proposes to critique. (47)

In a similar way, late-style narratives, by simultaneously integrating and opposing the theoretical discourses of lateness, step up against their arbiters and offer their own view of lateness. The metafictional form of the narratives, moreover, provides both a theory and an enactment of late style. Hence, the selected texts make a political statement, suggesting that they are self-sufficient and thus not dependent on late-style theory. The gesture within the work is therefore primarily one of *literary and textual empowerment*.

Empowerment is a strategy that aims at independence and self-determination in a situation dominated by stronger actors, and these actors, i.e. their discourses, will be examined in **Chapters 2** and **6**, whereas **Chapters 3**, **4**, and **5** are dedicated to the analysis of the selected literary works. As Kenneth McLaughlin writes in *Empowerment: A Critique*, it was within the various American liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s that "the term empowerment emerge[d] as an adjunct to that of power," denoting an attitude of "question[ing]

prevailing social norms and develop[ing] new forms of consciousness" (4). The way in which late-style narratives *perform empowerment* (of themselves as narratives, of their authors as artists, of old age) happens within two overwhelmingly powerful normative discourses against which the late works posit themselves: on the one hand, the late-style debate in art history, musicology and literary criticism, which functions as an imposition and a value judgment of late art, and consequently of the elderly artist's abilities; on the other, the social and political discourses of ageing, which arise from the fear of the expected demographic changes, shape the cultural landscape, and press ever more demands to which the elderly should respond. **Chapter 2** will lay the theoretical groundwork, outlining the tenets of late-style theory and providing an overview of existing approaches to old-age art. It will be argued that late style in contemporary literature is neither a natural, biographical effect of old age nor solely a construct that has been imposed on the works of art by critics. Rather, ageing authors living and writing in the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century feel *compelled* to address late style in their works and to develop a lateness of their own because their works are threatened to be devalued within the existing late-style discourse. Special attention will be devoted to Theodor W. Adorno's work on Beethoven's late phase: although Adorno's professed aim was a strictly formal, non-biographical assessment of late style, it will be shown that his writing actually gave rise to a distinct image of the elderly artist. Finally, a method of reading late style as a *code of production* will be proposed, which shall allow the integration of authorial self-presentation, textual self-referentiality, and generic form into the analysis of late literary works.

Chapter 3 will examine the way in which John Barth's *The Development* (2008) highlights issues of late-life creativity through a network of interrelated short stories. The strongly metafictional narratives not only blur and undermine the borderline between art and life but also counter seemingly fixed generic notions of the artist novel. On the basis of the claim that late works make reference to earlier texts by the same author (Zanetti 321; Taberner 195), *Lost in the Funhouse*, a postmodern *Künstlerroman* John Barth published forty years earlier, is used as a counter-narrative to compare the young and the old artist types. Barth, by modifying some of the statements about the role of the author and the processes of creative production and by providing the elderly artist-protagonist with autobiographical features, stages himself as a late stylist. What will thus be at the center of Chapter 3 is the complex interplay between the two works and the way in which the rigid generic structure of the *Künstlerroman* affects the production of a late-style narrative. A further topic covered in this chapter

is the structural irony that arises from the distance between the semi-autobiographical artist-protagonist and his author. The text thus becomes a stage for a power game in which the author affirms his agency by manipulating his protagonists and arguably also controlling his readers.

The observations made in regard to John Barth's *The Development*, especially those related to genre, can to a certain extent be considered valid for similar late-style narratives, but only for the male type. In **Chapter 4**, its female counterpart will therefore be at the center of attention, with Karen Blixen's short stories "Echoes" (1957) and "The Dreamers" (1934) featuring as female late-style narrative and *Künstlerroman*, respectively.[8] Blixen wrote "Echoes" a few years before her death and for this purpose resurrected the autobiographical character Pellegrina Leoni (an opera singer who had died in "The Dreamers"), turning the formerly young and radiant diva into an elderly woman. Blixen thus revises her former decision to provide closure through the protagonist's death and, by taking a clearly feminist stance, raises questions about gender in late artistic production. In addition, due to the two narratives' incompatible sets of information and their distorted chronology, an intricate web of meanings opens up *between* the two texts. As will be proposed, "Echoes" thereby projects the interpretation of the late work onto a historical plane outside the fictional text; it affirms the importance of art *as part of* life.

Chapter 5 attempts a crossover, as it examines Joan Didion's old-age autobiography. Paying close attention to the differences between fiction and autobiography, the chapter argues that autobiographical narratives may be used to make even more visible what is at stake for elderly authors when they seek stylistic innovation. By comparing and contrasting Didion's last two works, *Blue Nights* (2011) and *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), and further taking into account one much earlier text written by this icon of New Journalism, the analysis reveals how the elderly Didion attempts to unmask herself and create a more realistic view of old-age creativity than ever before. In *Blue Nights*, it will be argued, Didion also questions those branches of Western philosophy that

8 In recent years, the gender binaries masculine / feminine and their biological counterparts male / female have rightly come under attack, as there is an increasing diversity in shaping one's gender, as well as an increasing awareness of trans and intersex people. With regard to old age, there are attempts to raise political consciousness, too (see, for instance, "Equality for Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People in Europe," a joint policy paper by *AGE Platform Europe and ILGA Europe*, or "Queer Altern," a Swiss project that supports and provides nursing homes for queer people). Yet, genre studies and creativity theory are 'not quite there yet,' and most literary texts reproduce a strictly binary idea of sex and gender. For this reason, the present study mostly adheres to the traditional gender and sex binaries.

view human life as an accumulation of experience, knowledge and wisdom. Furthermore, by foregrounding her own erratic writing process, Didion undermines traditional views of art and the masterful artist, suggesting that the finalized work may not be so important after all. She thereby shifts the focus from the audience and the critics, who enjoy art, to the artist, who uses it as a life-saving routine. Being an important public figure, Didion thereby risks losing the support of her audience, who has become accustomed to her former signature style, and indeed, not all of the reactions to her swan song have been positive (cf. Cusk). This further underscores the precarious status of the ageing artist. Above all (and this may also be a reason for some of the negative reviews), Didion's *Blue Nights* conveys an image of radical honesty with regard to old age and late-life creativity, one which includes decline, frailty, and fear as a substantial part of the human condition.

Chapter 6, in examining the social and political conditions in which ageing artists and their texts are embedded, functions as a conclusion. As Linda and Michael Hutcheon assert, "[t]he internalization of societal attitudes toward aging presents challenges to artists, as it does to everyone who ages" ("Late Style(s)" 7). These challenges are outlined, and the results of the three previous chapters are related to both late-life creativity discourses and philosophical approaches to old age. Over the last decade, and as a result of the baby boomer generation growing old, issues relating to old age have shown an increasing presence in the public discourses, creating an atmosphere of ageism and pressure. Late-style theory and literary analysis have, to a certain extent, been complicit in this development. Thus, the chapter will conclude by suggesting a direction literary analysis could take in order to pursue an ethical, non-ageist practice in its investigation of old age and late-life creativity.

2 Late Style through the Ages: From Criticism to Creative Practice

> How, then, can we generalize about late style or elderly artists in a meaningful way? And more importantly, why bother?
>
> (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, "Historicizing Late Style" 58)

2.1 Late Style or Old-Age Style?

Indeed, why should we 'bother' to write about late style? Why should we discuss it and argue about it? Why define what it entails; why even use it as a simple label for ageing artists' works? With these questions, the probably most famous literary quote about labelling comes to mind, a passage from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet" (2.2.1–2). This is what Juliet argues when she justifies her fondness for Romeo, who belongs to the wrong aristocratic family. Yet, Juliet's attempt to diminish the importance of names is driven by passion. The critic's work, however, should be stripped of emotion. Hence, any discussion of old age art must begin with a sober examination of its "names," the terms that denote the phenomenon. Is it 'late style,' 'old-age style,' or just 'lateness' that we believe to spot in works that were written, painted, or composed at a late stage in an artist's career? Juliet would not mind the name as long as the 'product' satisfied her taste, and, likewise, critics could be tempted to laud late art without careful examination. But can there really be a 'product' without a concept attached to it? The roses that we recognize as such, the ones that smell sweetly, the ones we plant in a garden or tie into a bouquet or paint on a canvas, are species that have been bred over centuries, if not millennia, with the aim to make some desired features more salient. There are, of course, also non-bred, 'natural' roses, for example the *rosa canina*, the most common European wild rose, whose fruit is known as rose hip. Hardly anybody would think of this simple flower, though, when asked to think of a rose. Thus, when we describe the sweet smell and the appearance of a rose, we describe an artificially

created aesthetic concept that has been imposed onto nature, and which is consequently reproduced by nature.

A similar development can be observed with regard to the concept of late style. Bred in art history, musicology and literary criticism, late style has become a critical commonplace, and consequently a rule of creative production itself (McMullan and Smiles, Introduction 3). As Gordon McMullan has persuasively shown, late style, as it is perceived today, originated as a critical concept based on the "biological thought of certain German romantic philosophers" (2) and was imposed on Shakespeare's late plays in the second half of the 19th century, for instance by the Irish critic Edward Dowden (16).[1] As a result of the pervasive critical discourse of lateness, "at least in Anglophone culture, […] writers [would] self-consciously […] look to Shakespeare for precedents for their own late work" (5). The rose bred in theory had begun to reproduce itself independently within literature. Yet, this is not to say that late style is a natural result of the physical reality of ageing. Rather, it is a social product. In other words, authors develop a late style because they know that the concept exists. They are influenced less by their own ageing than by the scholarly and popular discourses about late-life creativity.

The history of critical reception has generated distinct ideas of old-age art and late-life creativity. Shakespeare's Prospero, Monet's water-lily paintings, and Beethoven's *Great Fugue* have come to stand for late style in literature, painting, and music, respectively. Theodor W. Adorno's seminal work on Beethoven around the middle of the twentieth century took the concept out of its critical niche and made it popular, and Edward Said certainly added further recognition to it half a century later. Yet, as is the case with Juliet's rose, however much one foregrounds the sweetness of its smell and the beauty of its bloom, one cannot help noticing the thorns, too. The theory of old age art seems to be caught in restrictive and simplifying binaries: the decline or culmination of the artist's skills; the foregrounding of either death or continuity in his or her works; the conflict between subjectivity and convention in their production. One could continue: art vs. reality, nature vs. history, and resignation vs. rebellion are further oppositions against which products of old age creativity can be gauged in a structuralist manner. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, in their article "Late Style(s): the Ageism of the Singular," caution against such clichés and ask: "[H]ow useful is this entire unstable concept of late style when it can be defined in such contradictory fashion […]?" (10).

1 Sohm notices even earlier critical constructs of late style in Italian art criticism around the turn of the eighteenth century (8).

Indeed, if one analyzes texts by ageing authors with these binaries in mind, Hutcheon and Hutcheon's statement that "[c]ritics find […] what they seek to find" (9) becomes all too true. It should not be too difficult to come up with a description of a certain artist's late phase, and, if inclined, one can draw parallels between artists and thus arrive at a set of late-style universals. One might discover, for instance, that the 'roses of late art' are usually paler than fresh ones, that they grow longer (or more, or fewer) thorns, that their stems are thinner or thicker and their leaves of a darker or lighter green. What one does not learn, however, is why this is so. As long as one works with such binary oppositions – even if just using them as opposite poles of a cline along which to place particular works of art – one will gain little insight into the forces that shape the *production* of late style. From the point of view of ageing studies, particularly its philosophical and sociological branches, old age art is relevant mainly because it is an indicator of underlying assumptions about old age creativity, that is, the belief systems that condition late style in the first place. In other words, the late rose's appearance is of interest because it should show us *why* it grew in this particular way. This is a question that has largely remained unexplored.

In 2016, Oxford University Press published a collection of essays titled *Late Style and Its Discontents*, which outlines the different ways in which late-style concepts in music theory, art history, and literary criticism have arrived at a point of paralysis. The term 'late art' is often used as a label but critics carry out little further investigation into the connections between old age and creativity (McMullan and Smiles, Introduction 1–2). Much of the fascination with late works, especially in literary studies, is connected to the idea that these are believed to

> constitute […] the artist's final vision, a meditation on the creative act and on human achievement that frequently offers a glimpse of future developments. In short, late style is presumed to demand our attention […] because a great artist's final statements disclose profound truths. (2)

Within this definition, the term 'late style' is freed from its old-age factor: indeed, an artist who dies at a relatively young age may create a masterpiece that is subsequently received as his/her final, weighty statement – provided that its creator is considered "a major creative voice" (3).[2] The term 'old-age style,' in turn, which takes the artist's advanced age as a condition for the work's production, applies to stylistic changes produced in an artist's old age independ-

2 McMullan and Smiles list Shakespeare and Keats as literary examples of artists who died relatively young, but whose last works are considered 'late' (Introduction 3). They add Goya and Mozart as instances in art history and musicology (Introduction 6).

ently of the work's (or the artist's) canonical status. In other words, whereas 'late style' makes a quality judgment, 'old-age style' is a qualitatively neutral, analytical category that foregrounds the relationship between the artists' age and style and presupposes a causal relationship between the two. In practice, however, the two terms often overlap and are used interchangeably (Amigoni and McMullan 378), with 'late style' dominating the critical discourse. This is frowned upon by McMullan and Smiles because it "arguably obscures the specific impact of old age on creativity" (Introduction 6).

Even though one should thus consider the connection between old age and creativity a priority in studying late art, the concept of old-age style is more problematic than McMullan and Smiles allow for. If one is to assert that a certain style of a composer, painter, or writer is influenced by his or her old age, one needs to be able to define what old age means. When and why does a person qualify as old? What are the factors that determine old age? A certain number of years lived? Physical frailty? Proximity to death? Numerous investigations suggest that old age is a fuzzy category, "a cultural construct" (Waxman 8), and ideas about what it means have shifted over the centuries. The leading German art historian Willibald Sauerländer, for instance, has shown that with the increasing secularization of the Western world, ideas about old age have developed from the concept of a passive phase of waiting for death in expectation of the afterlife (i.e. God's decision to take one's life) to the current focus on consumption, entertainment, and active ageing.[3] Moreover, as soon as we take the definition beyond *chronological* old age (i.e. the period of life after sixty, or seventy, depending on life expectancy), we will have to focus on *subjective* ageing, which is greatly influenced by a person's individual situation and his / her cultural environment, for instance health, or, rather, illness and pain (cf. de Medeiros and Black), as well as social and economic circumstances (cf. Twigg and Martin, "Identities"). Regional distinctions, as, for example, rural versus urban life (cf. Edmondson and Scharf) and, more importantly, race, class and gender differences (cf. Calasanti and King) add to the complexity and make it almost impossible to safely determine to what extent and in which ways old age influences a particular artist's creative production.

From this, it follows that there are only two valid methods to approach old-age style: either there is enough testimony by the artists themselves about what ageing meant or means for them and for their artistic activity,[4] or critics will

3 Another valuable source of information on historical concepts of old age is *The Long History of Old Age*, edited by the historian and ageing studies scholar Pat Thane.

4 An example of such an approach is Amir Cohen-Shalev's study on Ibsen, an artist who is "especially suitable for a life-span developmental analysis owing to his conscious and

have to rely on general cultural concepts of ageing – with due consideration of time period, region, gender, and class. The latter method, however, lifts the work of art from the strictly biographical context of its producer, and the study of old-age style turns into a purely abstract, reception-based investigation. Hutcheon and Hutcheon, in critically scrutinizing such approaches, emphasize their artificiality and ideological bias, stating that they are always "a retrospective, *critical* construct with its own aesthetic and ideological agenda and, most importantly, its own view of both aging and creativity" ("Late style(s)" 3, original italics). In other words, the latter approach diminishes insights into the "specific impact of old age on creativity" that McMullan and Smiles would wish to expand.

With these reservations in mind, and based on further reasons to be outlined below, the term 'late style' rather than 'old-age style' will here be proposed for investigations into the connection between artists' old age and their creative production, especially in the study of contemporary literature. The works selected for the discussion of stylistic changes in old age – John Barth's *The Development*, Karen Blixen's "Echoes," and Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* – were all written by ageing authors, and they could thus well carry the label 'old-age style.' However, although the texts abound with comments about old age, much of their impact lies in their urgency to make a *last and lasting statement on creativity*. The writers' old age is thus relevant not merely as *another* phase of life, after childhood, adolescence, and middle age have passed, but as the *last* stage, and therefore the last opportunity to be artistically productive. Within this line of argument, old age – with whatever markers it is culturally and personally endowed, the physical decline and loss of social status, or rather, the wealth of a long life and gained wisdom – remains an important factor, but it cannot fully account for the works' peculiar lateness. In *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, McMullan insists on the separation between old-age style and late style because late style, rather than being linked to old age, is "a celebration of a particular liminality – of, that is, the proximity of death. Late work is, in other words, borderline activity, a creative response to death, a kind of eschatology" that is not exclusive to old age (10). Yet, since old age is by definition always the last phase of life and therefore marked by the proximity to death, one could also argue that old age induces lateness, in the sense that the awareness of their advancing age may cause elderly authors to think about the liminal status of their life and their work. Karen Painter suggests:

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intense personal involvement in his creative output," and whose "writings clearly reflect the close relation between his art and self" ("Self and Style" 290).

> The artist who does not die suddenly has the opportunity, and often feels the compulsion, to concentrate on the implications – the *meanings* – of lateness. He or she can come to terms with the limits of life and achievement and focus on what still seems most important. (6, original italics)

For many artists, such a stock-taking is marked by a concern about the last impression that their work(s) will leave.

In the texts selected for this study, the feeling of urgency and the desire to make a last and lasting impression as an artist is observable on several levels. Most notably, this desire is expressed explicitly by the artist-protagonists portrayed in each story. In John Barth's *The Development*, the protagonist George Newett muses that he "would be remembered as a once-conventional and scarcely noticed writer who, in his Late Period, produced the refreshingly original works that belatedly made his name" (89). In Karen Blixen's short story "Echoes," Pellegrina Leoni, the ageing wanderer and former opera singer, decides to engage in one last act of creativity by turning a talented peasant boy into a professional singer, reflecting that "this last part bestowed upon her [by God] was the greatest of her repertoire and in itself divine. In it she must allow herself no neglectfulness and no rest. Were she to die at the end of the respite granted her it would be but a small matter" (171). She further compares her swan song's effect to Christ's resurrection, upon which "the whole world had built up its creed" (170). In Joan Didion's autobiographical novel *Blue Nights*, the author's desire to make a last statement can be best discerned in her wish to show herself in a direct, immediate way, rejecting her former authorial masks. "Let me try again to talk to you directly," she states (134). And: "The tone needs to be direct. I need to talk to you directly, I need to *address the subject as it were*" (116, original italics). What the statements from these three texts have in common is their strong concern for the audience. How will the late or last work be received? What kind of shadow will the creative work cast on its creator? What image of the artist will the general public and the critical community infer from it?

Such concerns about the response of the audience are, of course, nothing extraordinary in an artist's world, were it not for the fact that they are here directly linked to the artists' age. For each of these figures, old age contributes decisively to their wish to mark a stylistic change in their late creative works, and they state this wish explicitly. Unlike music and visual art, literature has the advantage of explicit language and rhetoric. Hence, the protagonists can express what old age means for them, which makes *subjective ageing* (rather than cultural stereotypes) more accessible to the critic. Interestingly enough, in each of the chosen works, the physical aspects are at the forefront. In Barth's *The Development*, long lists of age-related ailments and illnesses dictate how the various

elderly characters are perceived by the reader (26–28). In Blixen's "Echoes," Pellegrina imagines herself attending the presentation of her last work – the singing peasant boy – as "an old unknown woman in a black shawl, the corpse in the grave witnessing its own resurrection" (170). Finally, Didion's *Blue Nights* abounds in descriptions of Didion's frailty and her fear of it. She is constantly afraid of, for instance, falling in the street, or of not being able to get up from a chair after a concert has ended (e. g. 105–111).

This strong emphasis on age-related vulnerability and proximity to death raises some interesting questions while simultaneously complicating the positioning of late-style studies within the broader field of ageing studies. Should late style (or old-age style, for that matter) be defined as a stylistic phenomenon linked to physical decline? Is it physical reality that intrudes upon the mental product, effecting changes in its form (rather than, for instance, wisdom and spiritual transcendence)? Would one thus have to rename the phenomenon 'style of frailty'?[5] This would certainly not be doing any service to those branches of ageing studies dedicated to counter ageism, such as cultural gerontology (cf. Twigg and Martin, "The Field") and literary gerontology (cf. Falcus), since it would mean equating old age with decline and decay. Moreover, late works that foreground opposed values, such as the wealth of lived experience, would be excluded from this definition. Hence, how can we theorize late style usefully, without simply affirming the widespread peak-and-decline model (cf. Smiles 17) and fueling ageist discourse? Late-style theory is certainly not interested in suggesting that old age equals decay, but neither does it seem right to ignore the emphasis that many ageing authors place on physical decline.

One way of attempting a description of late style in connection with physical decline is to approach this decline neutrally, as a fact of human existence rather than a value judgment. The body must die, and it commonly approaches its death in stages rather than just collapsing all of a sudden. A neutral approach to physical decline allows us to avoid such commonplaces as "*despite* his frailty, author X still writes marvelously."[6] As Philip Sohm accurately remarks, "[e]xceptionalism is the masked twin of gerontophobia, the twin of denial and hope that

5 Joseph N. Straus, in his article "Disability and Late Style in Music," suggests that physical impairment may, in fact, effect lateness. He states that "the experience of living with a disability is a more potent impetus for late-style composition than age, foreknowledge of death, authorial belatedness, or a sense of historical lateness" (6).

6 Glyn Davis, for instance, writes about the Australian author and public intellectual Donald Horne: "Despite his frailty and failing voice, the 82-year-old Donald was sharp and engaged […]" (par. 105).

tries to recue old artists from a conventionally predicated decline" (26). In a similar manner, McMullan and Smiles acknowledge:

> [P]erhaps, in fact, we should redefine old-age style as something which is directly or indirectly the *product* of the adjustments and collaborations necessary for creative artists in old age, not something that exists *despite* such contingencies. (Introduction 7, original italics)

However, late style criticism in literature must move even beyond defining late style as a *product* of physical decline. If the field of ageing studies is to profit from investigations into late style, rather than simply affirming a causality, critical investigations should define the precise nature of the connection between age-related decline and artistic expression.

Thus, in this study, '**late style**' refers to characteristics in an author's work that are *recognizably caused by the author's awareness of old age*, particularly of its physical factors. The term 'style' is thus used in a broader sense and not restricted to stylistics only.[7] A '**late work**' is an artistic product, the composition of which is driven by the author's *desire to leave an impression as an ageing artist*, which is explicitly or implicitly revealed in the work itself, either through its content or its form.[8] A third term, '**lateness**,' will be employed to denote the authors' *concern for their late work's reception* and their awareness of late-style theories, an authorial stance that must be inferred from the elements of the text itself and from its comparison with earlier works.[9] These definitions restrict late

7 McMullan, in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, decides to use 'late writing' rather than 'late style' precisely because stylistics is not at the center of his study (6). I have considered adopting his terminology and reasoning. However, since it will here be argued that the authors under scrutiny consciously embrace existing critical ideas of *late style*, using a different term would unnecessarily blur my argument. Moreover, as Sontag has amply shown in her influential essay "On Style," content and style cannot usefully be separated, as style refers to a "set of rules," and these rules may also determine "the presence of certain 'content'" (37). The issue of content as a marker of style is also taken up by Adams-Price, who considers "the actual words, ideas, themes, characterizations, and philosophies that are consciously chosen and explicitly expressed in the writings" to be an important aspect of late-life creativity ("Aging" 274).

8 It seems important here to refer to Theodor W. Adorno's differentiation between late style and late work. Writing about Beethoven's later compositions and faced with the difficulty that some of them (e. g. the *Missa Solemnis* and the first two movements of the *Ninth Symphony*) did not, in fact, agree with his own catalogue of late-style features, Adorno recognized that not every individual piece written within an artist's late period features a late style; hence the distinction between late work and late style (cf. Hinrichsen 229–233).

9 This definition of lateness comes close to what McMullan terms "'knowing' lateness" in connection with Henry James's "The Middle Years" and with "the late James's en-

style to something explicitly or implicitly referred to in the late work itself. Late style is thus revealed in a metafictional manner; it is not just a *sign* of old age, but it makes a *statement* on its own nature and its status as a sign.

Writers thus actively use critical ideas of late style for their self-fashioning but they go beyond a simple adoption of these ideas.[10] Specifically in narratives that portray fictional or semi-autobiographical ageing artists in a self-reflexive manner, late-style theory is not just enacted, but developed. It is for this reason that such works were chosen for this study of late style. Firstly, through the portrayal of their aged-artist figures, they offer a theory of late creativity that can be studied in its own right. In the (semi-)fictional microcosm of the stories, the artist-protagonists' lives are the points of departure for their creative products. Hence, these texts suggest a causal relationship between old age and creativity and propose a late-style theory. However, almost inevitably, the proposed theory extends to the authors themselves because the artist-protagonists are fashioned in an autobiographical or near-autobiographical manner. This may produce friction because life facts and other details refuse to match. This friction between the creative theory internal to the text and the signs of lateness the work itself carries must be examined.

However, at least in current Anglophone literary criticism, drawing such parallels between the protagonists' and their authors' lateness creates a certain unease because it seems to fall back on outdated concepts of biographical interpretation, from which it is only a small step to intentional fallacy (cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley). Yet, the separation between author and work, which has dominated most branches of literary criticism since the mid-twentieth century, can be challenged. Seán Burke outlines the critical landscape as follows:

> For the best part of the twentieth century, criticism has been separated into two domains. On the one side, intrinsic and textualist readings are pursued with indifference to the author, on the other, biographical and source studies are undertaken as peripheral (sometimes populist, sometimes narrowly academic) exercises for those who are interested in narrative reconstructions of an author's life or the empirical genealogy of his work. Work and life are maintained in a strange and supposedly impermeable opposition, particularly by textualist critics who proceed as though life

gagement – indeed obsession – with the Shakespearean late phase and in particular with *The Tempest* as the supreme embodiment of late Shakespeare" (318).

10 See also Sohm: "[…] old artists start to act old not just because their aging bodies and minds dictate this but because the artists enact the roles that society expects of them. This can happen without their knowledge […] or […] as a self-conscious fashioning" (2–3).

> somehow pollutes the work, as though the bad biographicist practices of the past have somehow erased the connection between *bios* and *graphē*, as though the possibility of work and life interpenetrating simply *disappears* on that account. (187–188, original italics)

According to Burke, textualist critics, by deciding to ignore the various connections between authors and their creative products, simplify matters rather too much. As a result, issues of creative production have not been explored sufficiently. Yet, against the backdrop of the current 'return to biography,' a development that was already set in motion with Roland Barthes' *The Preparation of the Novel* and within which "the question of the author poses itself ever more urgently" (Burke 191), literary criticism could face the challenge to include the author in textual analysis. Frédéric Regard makes a plea for this, arguing that it "raise[s] crucial issues in the theory of interpretation, if only because the notion of the author's concrete life as person, a living individual, cannot be totally eradicated from the literary text" (396). The literary works' own encouragement to draw parallels between the protagonists and their authors could be a starting point for critics to work their way from a text to its writer. And what better material is there than narratives with protagonists that are, like their authors, acutely aware of the tenets of creative production – here in the form of late-style theory? Literary criticism could certainly benefit from theorizing the boundary between author and work more thoroughly, and late-style theory may uncover some notions of creative production that have remained veiled so far.

This boundary is subject to the concept of the **late-style narrative**, which develops a theory of late style through the portrayal of an aged artist-protagonist and *motivates the comparison* between the protagonist's and the author's creative processes. The works assessed in this study are all late-style narratives, and there are many more that one could include: Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*, Joseph Heller's *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, Paul Auster's *Winter Journal*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word*, Samuel R. Delany's *Dark Reflections*, and several of J. M. Coetzee's novels (for instance *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*), to name but a few. Unsurprisingly, the most straight-forward examples, listed above, are all written by male authors, for, traditionally, late style has been "an overwhelmingly male category" (Hutchinson, Afterword 238). Addressing the gender bias in late-style studies, McMullan states that "women have no place in the ranks of late stylists, just as they have no place (or at best a highly circumscribed place) in the larger concept – genius – of which late style is a sub-category" (17). Indeed, not only is there a noticeable gap in criticism about female late style, but female

authors also seem more reluctant to write about issues of late-life creativity than their male colleagues. The few works that come to mind when looking for Anglophone late-style narratives written by women include Sena Jeter Naslund's *The Fountain of St. James Court*, Penelope Lively's *Ammonites and Leaping Fish*, as well as the works by Karen Blixen and Joan Didion discussed in this study. Furthermore, there are traces of a late-style narrative in Alice Munro's most recent collection of short stories *Too Much Happiness*, and there are certainly further works that contain implicit references to the search for new forms of expression in old age.

Still, in comparison with the male type, female late-style narratives are scarce. This is no surprise: if one takes into account the hypothesis that ageing artists fashion their late works against the backdrop of late-style theories, and that these theories are mostly concerned with male artists, women writers do not see themselves reflected in these theoretical frameworks – nor may they feel the urge to *reflect on* late-style theories to the same extent as male writers. However, as more scholarly work on female late style is produced (see, for example, the collection of essays *Literary Creativity and the Older Woman Writer*), more female late-style narratives might emerge, too. The present study, with two thirds of its analyzed texts being written by women, shall thus also contribute to a growing corpus of late-style theory that – besides being wary of ageist methodology (cf. Introduction) – aims at a more balanced gendered discourse.

2.2 Universalist and Individualist Approaches

There is a strange paradox to the idea of late style, which has resulted in a persistent divide within the community of late-style scholars. It resides in the incompatibility of two of late style's tenets: on the one hand, there is the belief that late style is a universal phenomenon. On the other, the late artist is considered a genius and therefore marked by singularity. However, one can hardly insist on an artist's uniqueness, justifying his or her greatness with the presumed existence of his or her distinctive late period, and simultaneously affirm that late style just 'happens' in most artists' work in much the same way. In the greater part of late-style criticism, this paradox causes no major inconvenience because most studies are concerned with one particular painter, composer, or writer rather than with the conceptual implications of late-style theory. How-

ever, the theoretically oriented scholar must sooner or later deal with this contradiction, and there seem to be two ways of reacting to it: the *universalist* and the *individualist* approach, both of which have certain limitations.

Universalist scholars assume that old age has an inevitable effect on an artist's work and style; the artist's physical decline and closeness to death inscribe themselves in the work of art and thereby establish a close connection between the creative product and its producer's biography. Painter states:

> Our fascination with lateness arises from the fact that the decline through aging or sickness to death is a universal phenomenon. The relationship between biography and artistic creation may be clearer in late works than in any other phase of life, and the self-exploration that is often prompted by the confrontation of genius with old age or fatal illness can be as deeply human as it is self-referential. We prize artistic production that seems to sum up the accumulated experience of life in a mature aesthetic vision: works of art that pose questions of mortality and existential meaning speak to each of us. (1)

According to the traditional understanding of late style that Painter describes here, the universality of lateness has at least four aspects: Firstly, physical decline is supposed to be a universal experience. Secondly, this decline must necessarily be in conflict with "genius" due to their opposed connotation (inferiority versus superiority), and said conflict will instigate biographical "self-exploration." Furthermore, the late work that results from this process is said to provide a "mature aesthetic vision" and convey "existential meaning," and, lastly, because of its universality, the late work will "speak to each of us." However debatable these assumptions may be, they provide a convincing theory of our alleged preference for late works, and hence a justification of their supposed singular quality: since everybody will eventually undergo decline, we all prioritize late works because they record, and make sense of, the experience of decline. In view of the closure the theory offers, the questionable choice of premises does not easily come under scrutiny.

Yet, universalist tendencies in late-style theories go beyond the simple affirmation that old age will influence an ageing artist's work; scholars provide catalogues of specific characteristics that such late works arguably display. Joseph N. Straus assembled a three-page-long alphabetical list with attributes of late style in music as they appear in scholarly work: they go from "abstract" and "alienated" (8) to "severe" and "monumental" (10). Recognizing that such a list is "necessarily crude" and that "the categories tend to overlap to some extent" and even "occasionally seem to contradict each other," Straus proposes that late works should "share at least some of these characteristics, but not necessarily

all of them" (7). On the other hand, he also acknowledges that there are contemporary composers in their nineties who are still productive and whose "music continues to develop in interesting ways," but none of their stylistic developments seem distinctively late (4). In view of this inconsistency, Straus suggests that late style is induced by physical frailty and disability rather than by biological old age:

> Late-style music is understood as having certain distinctive attributes, often including bodily features (fractured, fissured, compact, or immobilized) and certain mental or emotional states (introverted, detached, serene, or irascible). It may be that in writing music describable in such terms, composers are inscribing their shared experience of disability, of bodies and minds that are not functioning in the normal way. (6)

However, even within his universalist approach, Straus allows for the possibility that "listeners and critics, knowing of the composer's disabilities, [may] read nonnormative physical and mental states into the music" (6), shifting his focus from the composition to the reception of the work.

In view of the difficulty to justify a universalist approach to late style, other scholars argue that stylistic changes in old age may be a universal phenomenon but manifest itself in individual forms, for, as Hutcheon and Hutcheon affirm, "[t]here are as many late styles as there are late artists" ("Historicizing" 68).[11] Imposing "a generalizing concept of late style (in the singular)" onto authors' works must therefore inevitably result in an ageist activity, since it cannot do justice to the individual circumstances in which each author lives and writes (68). The individualist approach to late style, then, is less prone to grand generalizations. However, if the late style of an individual artist is not comparable to any other artist's, this raises the question of how it can be recognized and assessed. Generally, scholars therefore resort to the comparative-sequential method: they evaluate an artist's entire oeuvre, comparing earlier with later or last works, and establish meaningful differences in order to group the individual texts, paintings, or compositions into phases. In literary criticism, individualist approaches that set out to distinguish the style of an author's last work(s) from his or her earlier output can be roughly divided into two groups. Firstly, there

11 Another reason for the preference for an individualist approach to late style is presented by Hutcheon and Hutcheon in "Late Style(s)": "It is obvious that each deceased composer, like each writer or painter, has last works, and […] once we know a work is the last, we cannot help but see it differently, often reading it as a definitive final statement. Because of this, *individual* late-style discussions become an inevitable part of the reception process" (2, original italics).

are those critics who identify three phases of production in an artist's lifetime – early, middle, and late – and thus follow the system commonly used in musicology, which is consistent with cultural notions of a human being's development: youth, middle age, and old age. The other group views the last works as an appendix to the main oeuvre whose beginning is marked by a turning point, which the critics duly identify. It may well be that this second method is influenced by one of Theodor W. Adorno's tenets, according to which the "dignity" of a composer depends on whether he will reach a late style in his artistic development (Urbanek 220).[12] From this, it follows that, no matter how famous artists are and how well their work is received at an earlier stage, their oeuvre will require a kind of retrospective authorization by their late work if they wish to be appreciated beyond their middle age. The late work therefore acts as a kind of commentary on the previous creative output.

Whatever individualist approach critics choose, they frequently end up drawing a fairly conventional image of the late author as a creative genius. An example is Adam Zachary Newton's treatment of Philip Roth's last four short novels, which Roth himself grouped together under the title "Nemeses." Newton selects two of these narratives, *Indignation* and *Nemesis*, and identifies them as a "prosthesis" in relation to Roth's earlier works. Newton claims that *Indignation* and *Nemesis* are marked by artificiality and, like prostheses, do not pretend to supplant the earlier longer (and arguably more accomplished) novels, as they must naturally fall short of the various functions which the lost 'body parts' – Roth's former novel writing skills – performed. By suggesting that Roth's earlier works were more elaborate and complete, Newton thus seems to take up popular notions of artistic decline in old age. However, he states that the last works' artificiality, reductiveness and flatness "possess […] an intrinsic power and 'fascination' in [their] own right" (131), affirming the almost magical attractiveness of enigmatic final words and staying in line with the traditional idea that closeness to death grants wisdom and transcendence. A further individualist study which ultimately reveals traditional late-style concepts is Stephen J. Burn's discussion of John Barth's late works. Burn initially contends that "the idea of imminent death does little to illuminate the signal qualities of Barth's later fiction" (182). Later, however, he states that "what we find in the fourth-period Barth [i. e. the late Barth] is […] a writer's meditation on *what it means to be at the end*" (187, italics added). Partly, this meaning of being "at the

12 Urbanek reports that Adorno mentioned this idea several times; it is unclear, however, whether he had adopted it from Alban Berg or from Arnold Schoenberg (220). As to questions of gender, it seems clear that Adorno did not allow for a female late style; hence, only the masculine form is used here to refer to the artist or composer.

end" is expressed through a distinct, active way of avoiding closure (184), "draw[ing] attention to the figure of the author" in order to create "chains of affect" between author and work (185). In other words – Burn does not put it quite so pointedly – Barth binds himself to his last works in order to affirm his existence and his control over his creative products. His lateness thus consists of a strengthening of his own position. Hence, he establishes an image of himself as an artist in his prime, a true late genius.

Individualist approaches may carry different argumentative thrusts and have different agendas: late-style studies in literature are not always written exclusively to explore texts but also to make a point about old age. Literary gerontology is the term for this field (cf. Falcus 54–56). Using literature to explore old age presupposes, however, a close connection between the late style detected in the works themselves and the physical or mental ageing process of their author. The division of an author's oeuvre into an early, middle, and late phase is based on such a connection, and even though a critical study may focus on an individual author, composer, or painter, if it makes use of this universalist division, the results are predetermined. According to Amir Cohen-Shalev, psychological life-span creativity research has shown that creative expression develops over the life course due to "psychological maturation" ("Self and Style" 298), and the differences between earlier and later phases are marked by the way in which the self positions itself in reference to its outer reality. Works by young artists typically show a "correspondence of self and style," an "emotional lyricism" and "extreme subjectivity" in which "'objective' reality does not have an independent existence; it can be rejected, transformed by the author's imagination, ignored or magnified, but it is always perceived and responded to from within" (295–296). In middle age, in turn, "the need of individuals […] to carve a niche in their community" shows in a concern "with effectiveness in the broader social world [that] often leads to a search for objective information on the external environment" (296). In old age, finally, self and reality "come to maintain an uneasy coexistence" in which "[f]ragmentation by design, incompleteness, internal contradiction and emotional ambivalence loosen the boundaries between inner and outer realities and enable a two-way flow," resulting in a "lack of distinction between fact and fantasy, autobiography and invention, [and] prose and poetry" (297).

Cohen-Shalev uses these findings in his study on Ibsen rather convincingly (cf. "Self and Style"), providing in-depth insight into Ibsen's works. Whether these three stylistic phases materialize in all artists' oeuvres is questionable, however, and even if they do, determining their precise form will still pose problems to the critic. Mark Twain, in his autobiography, writes that when

he "was younger [he] could remember anything, whether it had happened or not," but as his "faculties are decaying" in his old age, he shall soon not "remember any but the things that never happened" (113). One could now easily match his statement with the "lack of distinction between fact and fantasy, autobiography, and invention" that Cohen-Shalev assigns to old age ("Self and Style" 297). Yet, the fact that Twain is able to comment on his alleged inability *explicitly* – and probably somewhat tongue-in-cheek – makes such a direct correlation problematic. Actually, Twain *does* distinguish between fact and fantasy here, even though he claims that he does not. Indeed, he seems to take up prevailing ideas of lateness in literature or cultural notions of life-span development and twist them in his idiosyncratic manner, purposefully drawing attention to them rather than enacting them in a 'natural' way. Whether his statement can be considered an *instance* of late style is therefore questionable, unless late style is declared as consisting of a metaliterary *reflection on* existing concepts of lateness, as I have suggested above. Late style thus becomes a "'see-through' art where the tricks of the trade – the techniques of 'make believe' – are dropped and make way for an art of dis-illusion and de-sublimation," as Cohen-Shalev suggests in the slightly different context of old-age style in cinema (*Visions of Aging* 15). It follows that one can indeed use insights from psychological life-span research to support the analysis of late style in literature but such inquiries must go beyond a simple matching of the theories with certain aspects of the literary texts under scrutiny.

As the above discussion shows, no matter whether one approaches late style from a universalist or an individualist point of view, the enterprise is fraught with difficulties. Hence, at this stage, one must ask why the concept of late style continues to flourish in literature. A possible answer is that the idea of late style caters to our need for an artist figure, and it does so for both parties: the authors who produce writing in late style and their public who reads late style into the texts. The authors, on their part, define themselves as worthy of esteem when producing a late work marked by stylistic extravagance. Their audience, in turn, can affirm their belief in personal agency, as the works they read are testimony to a strong authorial figure who takes the liberty to pursue an individual stylistic approach in old age and thus proves to be in control of his/her actions. The universality of late style, believed to be detected in many artists' freedom to disregard conventions, is thus inextricably linked to individuality, as these artists decide to 'have it their way.' As will be outlined below, this artist figure is not connected to old age or late style in a natural way; rather, it is the result of the establishment of late-style theories. This movement began in the 19th cen-

tury, but it experienced its most important development with Theodor W. Adorno's lifelong project of describing Beethoven's late work.

2.3 Adorno and His Legacy: Shaping the Late Artist

Much has been written about Theodor W. Adorno's extensive, yet fragmentary treatment of Beethoven's late style. This comes as no surprise, given the lasting impact it has achieved.[13] Adorno began his project in 1937 with the publication of the short, four-page essay "Late Style in Beethoven," which is still the most often-quoted and most widely discussed text in connection with late style, and, "although an early text, it contains *in nuce* nearly all the motifs that will preoccupy Adorno for the rest of his life" (Spitzer 58). Not only were Adorno's essays and fragments on Beethoven's late style extensively reviewed in the fields of musicology, art history, and literary criticism, but they also became (and were, for Adorno himself), a way of describing modernity, and, more specifically, modernism, which he saw as "a sharpening and intensifying of modernity, or a response to it" (Hamilton 391).[14] Adorno held the view that Beethoven's late work, which is commonly believed to comprise the works composed in his last decade (1817–1827), was a precursor of modernism, and its fragmented, non-compliant character showed the "exhaustion of artistic forms," that is, "the character of all artistic activity in modernity, which thus begins its trajectory towards volatilization, abstraction" (Bewes 83).

Some of Adorno's thoughts may nowadays seem outdated or merely 'historical,' especially since he wrote in a time in which the Great War (and later also Nazi Germany) had taken a toll on philosophy.[15] "It is undeniable," Timothy

13 Even though Adorno's continuing influence is undeniable, his claims on Beethoven's late music have not remained uncontested, especially within the field of musicology itself. Hellmut Federhofer, for instance, shows that Adorno's formal and structural analyses and observations fall short because he lacks the necessary methodological skills in musicology (129). Similarly, Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen considers Adorno's Beethoven project a "failed masterpiece" [*gescheitertes Hauptwerk*] (218–219). This again is disputed by Richard Klein, who qualifies Hinrichsen's claim as "inaccurate" [*unzutreffend*] (Einleitung 73), although he recognizes some of Adorno's points.

14 Hutchinson describes Adorno's view of the connection between lateness, modernity and modernism as follows: "modernism itself emerges as the 'avant-garde' of an ageing modernity. The question becomes, in short, that of the exact relationship between *Spätstil* [late style] and *Spätzeit* [late period]" (*Lateness* 264, original italics).

15 Indeed, it was "[a]fter arriving as a refugee from Nazi Germany in New York in 1938" that Adorno began making notes for a longer book project, which he planned to call *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, but which he never completed (Stanley 362).

Bewes states, "that Adorno's lateness is in some sense a temporal hypothesis" (84). However, while one must historicize Adorno's thought and consider it at a distance from the current situation, critics should also identify those parts of his philosophy that are "open to future transformation," that is, the parts that contain a more general, non-historical truth claim (Klein, Einleitung 10–11).[16] In view of the breadth of Adorno's own approach to late style (he combined musicology with Marxist philosophy, aesthetic theory and art history) and the variety of academic fields in which his late-style theories have been received, this short section cannot possibly do justice to Adorno's work on Beethoven. Therefore, rather than attempting to provide an overview,[17] I shall single out a particular aspect of Adorno's view on late style and the way it has been taken up by Edward Said's recent contribution: the figure of the late artist, which has indeed proven to be 'open to future transformation' (to use Klein's phrase), as it is reproduced again and again and each time given a slightly different shape.

McMullan rightly states that "[i]f there is one inevitable outcome of work on late style, it would seem, that outcome is complicity with authorial self-fashioning" (16). It may seem odd that Adorno's writing has resulted in such a strong image of the artist, since his aesthetic theory is based on the principle of an art that is autonomous and his "conception of lateness was developed in fierce opposition to biographical criticism" (Bewes 84). He believed in the principle of 'art for art's sake' and the idea that "music lost its direct social function with the ascendancy of bourgeois culture from the late eighteenth century," when "aristocratic and church patronage declined, and non-functional 'art music' developed" (Hamilton 394). However, with this development, artists also

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Moreover, as Federhofer states, due to the historical developments in his recent past and present, Adorno was profoundly pessimistic towards the world. Contradiction and negation were his precepts, and any positive affirmation seemed to him a lie (130).

16 My own (paraphrastic) translation from German. The original passage reads: "Sein Denken ist zu historisieren und auf Abstand zur jetzigen Situation zu bringen. Zugleich geht es aber darum freizulegen, was den historischen Gehalt dieser Philosophie übersteigt, d. h. was zukunftsträchtig und für Veränderungen offen ist" (Klein, Einleitung 10–11).

17 See the following publications for more comprehensive treatments of Adorno's late-style theories and their continuing influence. A fine literary-historical overview is provided by Ben Hutchinson in his book *Lateness and Modern European Literature*, particularly in the chapter "Lateness as 'a European Language': Theodor W. Adorno and Late Style." Michael Spitzer, in *Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven's Late Style*, bridges the gap between musicology and critical theory, and Nikolaus Urbanek explores the influence of Adorno's writing on the current aesthetics of music in his study *Auf der Suche nach einer zeitgemässen Musikästhetik. Adornos* Philosophie der Musik *und die Beethoven-Fragmente*.

became more independent and they could produce "works that embod[ied] their own values rather than those of their patrons" (395). Hence, although creative works became more autonomous in a narrow sense in that they did not directly serve a political or social didactic (and possibly moralistic) purpose anymore, they could increasingly be designed to express their producer's biographical reality – their subjectivity. Indeed, as Jürgen Stolzenberg affirms, the leading theme of Adorno's writing on Beethoven *is* subjectivity (58). In this, Adorno fell in line with earlier, German romantic concepts that established "style as the organic product not of an epoch but of the life and will of a given artist" (McMullan 2). Thus, even if Adorno's project was declaredly based on an allegorical understanding of Beethoven's late compositions, the works themselves standing in for modernity rather than the old age of their composer, the image of the artist as the originator of the works was always at its core.[18]

In "Late Style in Beethoven," Adorno's first, obvious purpose is to devalue traditional interpretations of the great composer's late works, that is, those artist-centered approaches to his music that "make reference to biography and fate" (564). Beginning with a general characterization of late works as "not round, but furrowed, even ravaged," and "[d]evoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny" (564), Adorno then goes on to state:

> The usual view explains this with the argument that they are products of an uninhibited subjectivity, or, better yet, "personality," which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonance of its suffering, and disdaining sensual charms with the sovereign self-assurance of the spirit liberated. (564)

In such an approach, Adorno critically remarks, "late works are relegated to the outer reaches of art, in the vicinity of document," which supposedly makes it impossible to "fix […] one's attention […] on the work itself" in order to reveal its "formal law" (564). The need to discover the "formal law," in turn, arises from the "disdain […] to cross the line that separates art from document" (564). Otherwise, Adorno declares somewhat haughtily, "every notebook of Beethoven's would possess greater significance than the Quartet in C-sharp Minor" (564).

These introductory remarks contain the premises on which Adorno's subsequent argument operates, and they simultaneously reveal why these premises

18 On the allegorical (rather than symbolic) character of Beethoven's late style (as according to Adorno), see Spitzer (63–66): "The defense of allegory over symbol follows Benjamin's polemic against the nineteenth-century aesthetics of organic unity. […] Beethoven's allegorical character is thus anti-organic" (64).

are so crucial to his agenda in pursuing Beethoven's late style. Adorno uses Beethoven to exemplify and justify his view of modernity and especially modernism as a state of disruption. Beethoven's music must thus fit this purpose. It must (prematurely) express the *modernist Zeitgeist*, or rather, it must critique a *Zeitgeist* that is opposed to it,[19] one that still prefers harmony to fragmentation and decay.[20] Hence, for Adorno, late art cannot possibly consist of an artistic product in the biographical sense, one characterized by a unity which the artist masterfully conveys. The late work must be cleared of artistic sense-making, of *subjectivity*, so it can be truly *historical*, that is, contain "more traces of history than of growth" (Adorno, "Late Style" 564). Thus, a biographical approach would be unsuitable to reach the interpretations Adorno pursues, and he therefore denounces its presumed "inadequacy," its inability to recognize true art (hence the comparison with Beethoven's notebooks [564]), and dismisses psychological criticism as clichéd, flat (565) and sentimental (art as "touching relics" [566]).

Interestingly enough, Adorno here seems to be unaware that, in his desire for the artist's lack of subjective involvement, he simply covers it up with the critical inquiry itself. Adorno's criticism is thus not simply non-biographical, but pointedly anti-biographical, aiming to erase the connection between artist and work. His strategy resembles that of textualist critics who, according to Burke, "proceed as though life somehow pollutes the work" and "as though the possibility of work and life interpenetrating simply *disappears* on that account" (187–188, original italics). Admittedly, Adorno does not do away with subjectivity altogether; rather, he re-defines the relationship between subjectivity and convention ("Late Style" 566): whereas convention is still found in the late work in the guise of "formulas and phrases" that are "scattered about" in a "bald, undisguised, untransformed" manner (565), subjectivity does not join them into an organic whole anymore. Instead, "[t]he power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works

19 Bewes is right in correcting Said's statement that Adorno loathed the *Zeitgeist*, for "it is not any particular *Zeitgeist*, but the *category* of *Zeitgeist*, contemporaneity itself, that antagonizes Adorno's aesthetics" (84, original italics).

20 It is not my purpose here to outline Adorno's entire philosophy of music; nevertheless, some explanation seems pertinent: Adorno believed tonality in music (i.e. a harmonious, stable tonal system) to be a thing of the past, since tonality, according to him, had historically reached a point of decay or decomposition [*zerfallen*], and tonal chords had a sense and meaning that were not, to the contemporary individual, accessible anymore. Society had outgrown [*entwachsen*] tonal systems and could no more return to them than the economy could turn back to earlier systems of production. These thoughts are expressed in letters Adorno exchanged with Ernst Krenek, a composer who believed tonal and atonal systems could very well coexist (cf. Zehentreiter 250).

themselves," Adorno states: "It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art" (566). Hence, subjectivity releases its grip over the work of art – at least in the anti-biographical critic's approach.

Adorno does not entirely succeed in disposing of the artist's influence over the late work. One is tempted to quote Paul Watzlawick's famous first axiom of communication: "behaviour has no opposite. In other words, there is no such thing as non-behaviour or, to put it even more simply: one cannot *not* behave" (48, original italics). In the same way, one could say, subjectivity cannot be expressionless, and the artist's work cannot just *not* be biographical, since artistic creation *is* behavior. Although this claim admittedly disregards the complexity of Adorno's points to some extent, it becomes persuasive once we consider Watzlawick's immediate consequence of the first axiom: "one cannot *not* communicate" (49, original italics). For, in his attempt to negate the artist's influence, that is, to *not* use a biographical approach in his essay, Adorno in fact evokes it. As he dismisses biographical readings and provides several examples of biographical interpretation *ex negativo*, the approaches he aims to discredit are actually made present to the reader. This does not invalidate Adorno's point on non-biographical readings. However, it does leave the reader with an image of the artist.

The artist's figure appears even more strongly when Adorno, "struggling for the exact calibration of the relationship between artistic subject and aesthetic object" (Hutchinson, *Lateness* 259), resorts to figurative language to endow his view of late art with additional expressiveness. The tropes by which the philosopher conveys his idiosyncratic catalogue of late-style characteristics consist of half terminology, half metaphor (Hinrichsen 226), and, surprisingly, these tropes reveal a conventional biographical image of the creative artist. Just after establishing that subjectivity "takes leave of the works themselves" ("Late Style" 566), Adorno writes:

> Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with being, are its final work. […] No longer does he gather the landscape, deserted now, and alienated, into an image. He lights it with rays from the fire that is ignited by subjectivity […] Objective is the fractured landscape, subjective the light in which – alone – it glows into life. He does not bring about a harmonious synthesis. As the power of dissociation, he tears them apart in time, in order, perhaps, to preserve them for the eternal. (566–567)

Despite Adorno's claim that he is merely interested in the formal analysis of music, the image of the artist in the above quote has a strong physical presence ("the hand of the master") as well as creative strength ("he tears them apart") and might ("power"). His biographical presence is further shown in the *intention* with which he composes the works, namely in order "to preserve" both the "fractured landscape" and the "light" of subjectivity. The artist thus possesses agency.[21] In addition, and as if this reference to intention were not enough of a heretic stance, Adorno also calls the characteristics of the late work "witnesses" to the subject (although the subject, the mentioned "I confronted with Being," may be a reference to the human condition rather than to the individual artist). Finally, in the "hand of the master," the artist's agency is linked to genius, even more so in the German original, in which "*die meisterliche Hand*" ("Spätstil Beethovens" 17) encompasses the sense of 'the *skillful* hand' as well.

As Andrew Goldstone rightly states, some of these passages "cohabit awkwardly with Adorno's formal rules in his norm of late style" (74). However, even though one can view these inconsistencies in Adorno's theory as "the *true* content of Adorno's ideal of impersonality," which is the idea of a subjectivity "*striving* to erase itself" (74, italics added), the impressive visual tropes leave the reader with a distinct, formidable and lasting image of the late artist. Still, it is important to note that Adorno does not directly violate his concept of a non-biographical approach, nor does he betray his idea of autonomous art and absolute music, since he argues that this image of the artist is provided in the *form* of the music itself. However, the essay's "enigmatic tone" (Spitzer 58) and its "opaque, aphoristic and at times internally inconsistent brilliance" and fragmentariness (McMullan 14) may, at the very least, give rise to selective interpretations. As Susan Sontag argues in her essay "On Style," when we speak about style, we refer to "the totality of a work of art," and "[l]ike all discourse about totalities, talk of style must rely on metaphors. And metaphors mislead" (22). A little less pointedly, one could say that metaphors call for interpretation.

Most notable in interpreting Adorno's work on Beethoven, especially in the field of Anglophone literary theory, are Edward Said's essays, which were posthumously published in the volume *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*. McMullan and Smiles call them "[t]he most prominent recent inter-

21 In foregrounding the agency of the artist, the present analysis agrees with Urbanek, who states that Adorno aimed to show that Beethoven's late style was objective critique rather than subjective reflection. For, in his late phase, Beethoven was very well able to also write works that did *not* feature any late style (227). From this, it follows that late style is a conscious choice, and that the artist is an active agent whose creative work is the product of his will and his decisions.

vention in the field" (Introduction 5).[22] Indeed, Said perceives the artist figure in Adorno quite clearly, and he does not hesitate to refer back to Adorno himself in a biographical approach of his own, stating that "the figure of the aging, deaf, and isolated composer [i.e. Beethoven]" was fully "convincing as a cultural symbol to Adorno" (8). Here, Said readily jumps from Adorno's formal analysis of the late music to the composer of flesh and blood. Since Said's volume only came out in 2006, one can hardly claim that he influenced the artist image of the works discussed in this study, some of which were written earlier. Nonetheless, Said's take may be seen as an example of how easily one can move from Adorno's form-focused late-style theory to an artist-centered biographical reading of late works.

There is a further, almost curious way in which Adorno's late artist type was cemented: through the collaboration with his friend, the author Thomas Mann. Their combined philosophical and literary efforts resulted in a dramatic novelistic portrait of Beethoven in Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*. The "frightful story […] of the sacred trials of […] the person of the afflicted artist" (Mann, *Doctor Faustus* 57) fictionalizes Beethoven's composition of the *Missa Solemnis*: struggling with the fugue in the "Credo" (Beethoven was believed to be unable to write a fugue), old Beethoven forgets to have dinner until after midnight and then furiously drives his maidservants out of the house because they have meanwhile fallen asleep, and the food has dried up on the stove.[23] The story continues in a manner that is both hilariously funny and deeply moving:

> [Beethoven] worked in his room on the Credo, the Credo with the fugue – the young ones [i.e. two visitors] heard him through the closed door. The deaf man sang, he yelled and stamped above the Credo – it was so moving and terrifying that the blood froze in their veins as they listened. But as in their great concern they were about to retreat, the door was jerked open and Beethoven stood there – in what guise? The very most frightful! With clothing disheveled, his features so distorted as to strike terror to the beholders; the eyes dazed, absent, listening, all at once; he had stared at them, they got the impression that he had come out of a life-and-death struggle with

22 References to Said's essays are omnipresent in current contributions to the field of late style. More recently, however, his views have come under attack. McMullan and Smiles, for example, adopt a critical tone, as they observe "a shared discomfort" with Said's "replicat[ion of] the romantic understanding of lateness" (Introduction 5; cf. 12), and Bewes dismisses Said's reading of Adorno as subjective and all too selective (84).

23 The narrated episode is in fact a retelling from a lecture by the fictional Dr. Wendell Kretzschmar, an eccentric musicologist, who is, to some extent, an ironic figure. The events around Beethoven's composition of the *Missa* are thus embedded in a web of different fictional levels and meanings, which cannot be explored fully here, however.

> all the opposing hosts of counterpoint. He had stammered something unintelligible and then burst out complaining at the fine kind of housekeeping he had, and how everybody had run away and left him to starve. […] Only three years later was the Mass finished. (58)

This fictional depiction of the late composer echoes several aspects of Adorno's "Late Style in Beethoven," especially when considering Adorno's idea of non-late art as *formal convention*. Beethoven's wild fury, his withdrawal to his room, and his disregard for social hours in Mann's novel resemble the "irascible gesture with which [subjectivity] takes leave" of the work of art, as a result of which the conventions are "left to stand" (Adorno, "Late Style" 566) – the maidservants and visitors of the Beethoven household quite literally being 'left to stand' waiting, perplexed at the master's behavior. Further, Adorno's idea of late style "cast[ing] off the appearance of art" (566) is embodied in Beethoven's disheveled clothing and his socially unacceptable appearance. In this way, the composer himself comes to stand for the late work, whereas his surroundings represent the conventions of non-late art. The passage thus conflates the ageing artist and his late work.

This preliminary conclusion, however, is complicated once we take a closer look at Mann's language. Probably the most fascinating fact about this passage from *Doctor Faustus* is that it contains a compressed version of Adorno's essay in one single phrase: that Beethoven seems to have "come out of a life-and-death struggle with all the opposing hosts of counterpoint" (Mann, *Doctor Faustus* 58). In this statement, the order of the noun phrases, "life-and-death struggle" / "opposing hosts" / "counterpoint," substantially influences the reader's perception. In a strictly sequential reading and understanding, the "life-and-death struggle" is first perceived literally as pointing to Beethoven's approaching death, evoking an ageing or ill man who is trying to resist his demise. As the "opposing hosts" are added, the old man's struggle is flavored with religious meaning, especially when considering the intertextuality signaled by the novel's title: in the Dr. Faustus legend, the dying genius has to confront the devilish force that contributed to his success in return for his soul. This chain of meaning suddenly collapses – not without comic relief, after such grave considerations – when the word "counterpoint" completes the picture: the struggle now turns into an artistic rather than a physical or spiritual one, in which the ageing composer attempts to master the musical conventions and rules. A historical component is added by the fact that counterpoint represents the classical tradition *par excellence*, which Beethoven is here struggling with. Hence, he becomes the epitome of a new artistic movement.

This process of reading and understanding Mann's phrase reflects Adorno's didactic aim towards his own readers, and the analyzed phrase thus reveals an entire philosophy of music. Just like in Mann's passage, Adorno's readers in "Late Style in Beethoven" are guided from a (supposedly wrong) biographical understanding of late style towards the (supposedly correct) formal, abstract notion of lateness. In the former, the artist's struggle with death is real, whereas, in the latter, the deathly struggle is an allegory for a historical development. In this sense, the reference to "counterpoint" represents quite literally a *counter-point*: it contains the structured sense of harmony of the classical period, which the late Beethoven supposedly strives against. Just as Mann connects the musical figure of counterpoint with the devilish "opposing hosts," moreover, late style's struggle against these forces is also assigned a notion of heavenly truth. This recalls the passage where Adorno states that the subjectivity of the late artist "in the name of death, disappears from the work of art into truth" ("Late Style" 566). The English translation takes some interpretive license here. The original German version reads: "[*Die Subjektivität*], *sterblich und im Namen des Todes, verschwindet in Wahrheit aus dem Kunstwerk*" (Adorno, "Beethovens Spätstil" 17). Its last part could thus also be translated as subjectivity "truly" disappearing from the work of art (rather than disappearing "into truth").[24] The difference in meaning becomes apparent when Beethoven's struggle with the "opposing hosts of counterpoint" is considered (Mann, *Doctor Faustus* 58): in line with Adorno's original German essay, the "life-and-death struggle" (Mann, *Doctor Faustus* 58) of the late artist should not be aimed, as one could wrongly gather from *Doctor Faustus*, at *mastering* counterpoint, which would result in the inscription of the composer's subjectivity into the conventional classical tradition. Rather, it is a struggle against *being mastered* by the tradition of counterpoint; that is, the struggle is aimed at making the sense-gathering subjectivity *truly disappear* from such art, thus leaving it fractured and broken. In this sense, the "landscape" of the classical tradition in music, represented by counterpoint, is left "deserted now, and alienated" (Adorno, "Late Style" 567), an image that extends to modernity in general.

When reading Mann's passage alongside Adorno's "Late Style" essay, what stands out clearly is that Adorno's late-style project was in fact a way to legitimize his prioritization of a type of art that is enigmatic, fractured, and contra-

24 The translation of Adorno's essay by Susan H. Gillespie, stating that subjectivity "disappears from the work of art into truth" ("Late Style" 566), is a valid one. As with every translation, however, it contains an interpretation and, inevitably, certain aspects are highlighted at the cost of others.

dictory,[25] and Adorno extended his focus to the artistic attitude attached to it. Obviously, the musical avant-garde of modernism with Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg would provide such art, and it is equally obvious that Adorno was elitist in his assumption that no easily understood musical piece was truly artistic.[26] Keeping this in mind, and trying to understand the intrusive appearance of the late artist in Adorno's professedly non-biographic approach, one will find an explanation in Said's comments:

> I think it is right […] to see Adorno's extremely intense lifelong fixation on third-period Beethoven as the carefully maintained choice of a critical model, a construction made for the benefit of his own actuality as a philosopher and cultural critic in an enforced exile from the society that made him possible in the first place. To be late meant therefore to be late for (and refuse) many of the rewards offered up by being comfortable inside society, not the least of which was to be read and understood easily by a large group of people. (21–22)

According to Said, Adorno thus used the late Beethoven to justify his own difficult, non-compliant philosophical attitude: by way of his admiration of the ageing composer, he himself turned into a 'late artist' though he was still young.[27] In this context, one of Ben Hutchinson's comments is illuminating, although it is made in a slightly different context: he writes that Adorno "wants to preserve the particularity of *Spätstil* [i. e. late style] […] from its creeping association with *Altersstil* [i. e. old-age style]" (*Lateness* 258). In order to make his late-style theory compatible with his own, 'young' lateness, he must rid late works of "the proximity of death that is traditionally ascribed to [them] – and that is generally held to lend them their pathos" (*Lateness* 258–259).

The way in which Adorno fashioned his writerly stance after what he believed to be Beethoven's own attitude has remained a model for subsequent authors and artists who strive for the enticing characteristics that the late artist figure encompasses: eccentricity, agency, liberty and fame. More than the theoretical essence of Adorno's famous 1937 essay, it was the vivid imagery of its language that encouraged this trend. Moreover, Thomas Mann's novel played an import-

25 Cf. Hutchinson, who states that Adorno "fetishizes […] the fragment" (*Lateness* 261).

26 Hamilton also draws attention to Adorno's elitism, further linking it to his "apparent dismissal of popular culture" (e. g. Jazz music): "for someone whose musical world-view was so narrow," he states, "Adorno's influence has been surprisingly broad" (392).

27 See also Hutchinson, who states: "It is perhaps not surprising, then, that this double bind – the attempt to resist the same late modern world of which he is a product – should be reflected in Adorno's own style" (*Lateness* 262).

ant role. As Hinrichsen explains, it was the publication of *Doctor Faustus* in 1947 that caused the reprinting of "Late Style in Beethoven" and made Adorno's essay popular again (226). It thus seems plausible that readers who were familiar with *Doctor Faustus* would perceive Adorno's references to the late artist in "Late Style" with even more clarity and thus favor an artist-centered reading over one that considered merely the formal aspects of Beethoven's late work. The contemporary late artist had been born.

2.4 Expanding Lateness in Literature: Late Style as a Code of Production

Among the authors who have fashioned themselves as late artists are, most prominently, ageing postmodernist writers: those who have always worked within the metafictional terrain, exploring and pushing the boundaries of literature. Mark Currie describes metafiction as "a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject" (Introduction 2). Hence, metafictional writers have evidently not remained oblivious to the scholarly discussion on late style. In *Late Style and Its Discontents*, McMullan and Smiles declare that their collection of essays is "designed as a provocation, as encouragement to art historians, literary critics, and musicologists alike to reflect on received ideas about creativity at the end of life" (Introduction 2). Looking at the current *literary* landscape, one can confidently state that postmodern authors have been addressing precisely this challenge for some decades now. They have not only been enacting aspects of late style and thus provided critics with new material to analyze, but also reflected on the late-style debate, pushing it further. Patricia Waugh calls metafictional writers the "contemporary avant-garde" (10), and Sandro Zanetti titles his extensive late-style study *Avantgardismus der Greise* ("avant-gardism of the aged"), hinting that late art displays just such an avant-garde spirit. In doing so, late works have created a site of discourse that runs parallel to the scholarly late-style debate. Considering such literary late-style treatments in conjunction with theoretical texts should therefore produce intriguing results. In the same way as Thomas Mann's passage from *Doctor Faustus* communicates with Theodor W. Adorno's essay "Late Style in Beethoven," one could argue, fictional and theoretical contemporary treatments of late style interact in a mutually prolific manner.[28] Al-

28 By 'contemporary,' I refer, on the one hand, to the coexistence of fiction and theory in a certain period, but also, more specifically, to works that were written after Adorno's

though Mann's text was, strictly speaking, fashioned *after* Adorno's essay – in both its temporal and conceptual sense – its literary means act independently, producing meanings of their own. These meanings, when projected back onto the theoretical source text by Adorno, further illuminate the theoretical content of Adorno's essay. In a similar manner, literary works that circle around late style may enlighten the scholarly late-style debate, from which they originally arose.

This is not the only manner, however, in which contemporary works that exhibit late style may be approached. McMullan and Smiles have raised the question as to how one can counteract the "discontents" of the late-style debate, assess late style in a more satisfactory manner and thus "find new, more reflexive, more critically and theoretically nuanced and rigorous ways to account for the creative possibilities associated with the end of the artistic life" (Introduction 12). This question will be addressed and three different ways will be proposed in which the reading of late-style narratives can be made productive for the late-style debate without the need to resort to simplifying binary oppositions or to lapse into otherwise problematic universalist and individualist approaches.

At this stage, it must be emphasized that contemporary authors use late style in a complex manner and employ different levels of literary communication. Their texts do not exhibit Adorno's late-style characteristics such as the fragmentariness of the artwork and the dissociation between subjectivity and convention. Rather, they are influenced by the image of the late artist and guided by the belief that lateness is an indicator of artistic accomplishment. However, even if we notice such similarities between the individual works, this cannot – and should not – result in a universalist approach, since the way in which authors *implement* late style is highly individualized. What McMullan and Smiles suggest is all too true: "Late style […] is a process still made more complex as creative artists become more and more versed in ideas of lateness" (Introduction 6). It would thus be disproportionate (and all too reductive) to simply read Adorno's characteristics into a contemporary late work.[29] However, late style cannot be considered simply an invention of the critics either, since the late-style narrative explicitly refers to lateness and thus includes late-style concepts in the literary text. In view of these implications, late style will here be

influence had taken hold of the late-style discourse, that is, roughly since the mid-twentieth century.

29 Spitzer, too, believes it inadmissible to focus on late-style traits such as "fragmentary," since this would not do justice to Adorno's main argument (59), even though Adorno did, at one stage, provide a "checklist of features" with seven criteria that define lateness (62).

approached as a *code of production*, that is, a means of communication that is consciously and purposefully used by the authorial figure. Yet, late style is also a code of production with regard to the reading process; it is thus an essential *meaning-making tool* within the text. This presupposes a common ground of understanding between the authors and their audience, which may be one of the core reasons why authors resort to the late-style narrative. With its semi-biographical artist-protagonists, its *mise-en-abîme*, and its metafictional mode, it is a particularly convenient medium: it can deliver its own theory alongside its narrative content, providing its readers with the necessary theoretical basis.

In the late-style narrative, late style firstly becomes a *personal* code of production in the way authors fashion their creative identity. Hutcheon and Hutcheon, even though they generally view late style as a concept imposed upon the text by the critic, acknowledge in a footnote that there may also be "the artist's *own* view of his or her […] self-construction as a 'late-artist'" ("Historicizing" 54, original italics). This self-fashioning may have a variety of biographical reasons, which obviously cannot be determined via deduction, using the creative product as a kind of symptom. A comparison with earlier, non-late texts of the same author, in turn, promises valuable insights. As Zanetti argues, late works can only be considered late in reference to what has been there earlier (9). Moreover, the metatextual comments in the late work itself provide some additional clues. What stylistic adjustments were performed? How does the late work refer back to the author's earlier style, and how are the stylistic changes justified? These are questions that can be pursued. Moreover, the historical development of the late-style debate provides its own clues. Not only has Adorno supplied us with a model that praises lateness, but earlier approaches also view late style as the highest possible achievement, granted only to truly great artists. As a consequence, the opposite is also evoked and it becomes a daunting prospect: without a late style, an author's previous work is threatened to be devalued (cf. Urbanek 220), and the peak-and-decline model of creative production, which suggests that "artistic creation declines with advancing age" (Cohen-Shalev, "Old Age Style" 22), is confirmed.[30] This was not always the case, as Painter states:

> Before the romantic period, when the concept of late style gained a foothold in aesthetics, the greatest praise one could bestow on an older artist's output was to report

30 See also Painter: "Historians of ancient art and architecture were the first to classify epochs and styles into the three-part division of early, high, and late. […] This traditional structure employs canonic – biological and implicitly moralistic – sequences of development that result in a metaphorical trope of rise, culmination, and decline" (1).

> no change – which is to say, no *decline* – in quality from earlier works. (2, original italics)

Already in the early 19th century, however, the peak-and-decline model was firmly established. The fact that the ageing Beethoven was believed to be unable to compose a fugue (as taken up in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*) can be seen as an example. Two centuries later, contemporary ageing authors feel *compelled* to develop a late style of their own, and the fear of creative failure in old age is deeply ingrained in their works.

If a late style is established, then, the author affirms his or her agency, although the attempt itself may be even more valuable than its success. Hutchinson notes a paradox in such a willful production of late style:

> [T]he achievement of late style implies a hermeneutic circle: the artist must know what he – it is an overwhelmingly male category – is setting out to achieve, but by definition he cannot know until he achieves it, else he is not yet 'late.' (Afterword 238)

This is an interesting proposition. Hutchinson's view, however, depends on an understanding of late style as superiority in artistic quality, and, moreover, it is produced as a response to critics who believe late style to be a universal, natural phenomenon. Here, the distinction between lateness and late style becomes important: whereas the former refers to the artist's attitude, to his/her setting out to achieve a late style, the latter is its imprint upon the artistic product. When this distinction is made, the idea of late style is purged of the clinging notion of high quality and achievement. In an author-centered approach, lateness itself – the will and decision to attempt a stylistic change – is valued. The ageing American writer Nicholas Delbanco, in his very own late-style intervention titled *The Art of Old Age*, confirms that "to the aging writer, painter, or musician the process can signify more than the result; it no longer seems as important that the work be sold" (16). Lateness as an authorial attitude, therefore, is an important and useful concept to explore the authorial self-fashioning that late style allows for. Hence, as a *personal* code of production, the concept of late style gains a plurality of meanings that can hardly be appreciated in a classical approach to art as autonomous.

A second and distinct way of assessing late-style narratives is by considering them as *self-referential systems* and by aiming to detect their work-internal logic. In such an approach, the code of production is considered self-referential in that the work provides its own theory in whose light late style should be viewed. Narratives that encourage such an approach are usually overtly and explicitly metafictional. They are characterized by a propagated self-sufficiency, and their

most important feature is *mise-en-abîme*: the artist-protagonist is portrayed as setting out to fashion his / her identity as a late artist much in the same way as the real author does by writing the fictional or semi-biographical late-style narrative. Rather than just duplicating the protagonist's struggle with late style and projecting it onto the real author,[31] however, one should consider this *mise-en-abîme* a more complex site of meaning-making. Protagonists may be ironic figures, as happens in John Barth's *Development* and, to a certain extent, also in Karen Blixen's "Echoes," which creates distance between author and character. Furthermore, if the characters are not fully autobiographical, every little difference to their authors carries meaning. A further complication arises with these narratives' combined diegetic-mimetic method, that is, the way in which they simultaneously *tell* and *enact* the principles of late style. This entails a systemic curiosity: in a first, straightforward approach, we may consider the protagonist to be *enacting* lateness and late style, whereas the author *tells* about it. However, once we take the real author's lateness into account, we turn the tables. Now, the protagonist's story *tells* us about late style, and the narrative as a whole *enacts* the late style of its author. Hence, the self-referentiality works both ways, which provides this approach with considerable complexity and productivity.

By pretending to be self-sufficient, the late-style narrative also attempts to resist a traditional assessment via mainstream late-style discourse. Since the narrative provides its own theory, it suggests that no other theoretical input is required (or appropriate, for that matter). This is a mere demonstration of power. The author assumes a very convenient position from where he / she can control the meaning and thus also the reception of his / her work (although the text may lend itself to deconstruction). In interplay with the first approach, i. e. the author's self-fashioning as a late artist, one must ask what such a clutching at interpretive authority entails. Is it a confirmation of the author's late style's *individuality,* suggesting that no previous theory would be able to do it justice? Or, rather, is it motivated again by the concern that the work could be received unfavorably, that is, the fear of artistic failure? According to Hutcheon and Hutcheon, such apprehension would be justified: "Throughout history […] there is a negative as well as positive discourse of lateness. Often, when a late work

31 Much like in Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, it usually *is* a struggle: writer's blocks and other failures seem to be late artist-protagonists' daily business. Examples can be found in John Barth's *The Development*, Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*, Joseph Heller's *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, Philip Roth's *The Humbling*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, as well as Christopher Bram's *Father of Frankenstein*, the last not being written by an ageing author but taking up the topos of the struggling ageing artist.

appears, responses are genuinely divided between approval and dismissal" ("Historicizing" 52). Hence, self-reflexivity and self-sufficiency in late-style narratives arguably are an attempt to make sure that the work will not be dismissed. Most importantly, however, if we consider late-style narratives as self-referential works rather than filtering them through existing late-style theories, we are encouraged to appreciate their spirit of novelty and to read them with fresh eyes.

Whenever late-style narratives refuse to be brought into contact with theory, they open themselves up to a different system of intertextual assessment, which is, thirdly, the *generic* code of production. Narrative portrayals of ageing artists display remarkable similarities. In the course of doing research for my study *Kompass zur Altersbelletristik der Gegenwart*, I assessed a corpus of approximately one thousand German, English, French and Italian novels and short stories that deal with old age from a variety of perspectives.[32] I found that in roughly one tenth of them, the authors assign a prominent role to old-age art and creativity (Pro Senectute Schweiz). In many cases, a late-style narrative with an artist-protagonist is used to explore these issues, and, after a while, I could predict such stories' structures and outcomes with considerable accuracy. I had begun to approach them comparatively and recognized their shared generic code of production. According to Franco Moretti, literature works with "formal patterns […] in order to master historical reality, and to reshape its materials in the chosen ideological key" (xiii). If one disregards generic form, Moretti claims, the complexity of this process is lost (xiii). Hence, a generic reading of late-style narratives can reveal the *processes* through which ageing authors come to terms with two kinds of historical reality: their own ageing and the existing late-style debate. Moreover, Jonathan Culler states:

> The function of genre conventions is essentially to establish a contract between writer and reader, so as to make certain relevant expectations operative, and thus to permit both compliance with and deviation from accepted modes of intelligibility. (147)

It is thus by comparison with a projected ideal genre (which may not be represented in its entirety in any individual work) as well as in distinction to other, related genres that late-style narratives are endowed with meaning.

In order to outline the principles that underlie late-style narratives, a related aspect – gender – must be addressed. As noted by various scholars, female artists have largely been excluded from concepts of late style (e. g. Hutchinson, After-

32 It was the collection of the Pro Senectute Library in Zurich, a media center which mainly holds scientific sources on old age, but had, over two decades, also been accumulating a great number of fictional and autobiographical texts.

word 238; McMullan and Smiles, Introduction 4). "This is not to say," McMullan writes, that "women artists, writers and composers have not produced remarkable work late in life, but rather that critics have effectively never attributed the cachet of late style to that work" (18).[33] For this reason, late-style theories probably have a different effect on women's literary production, the exact nature of which is still to be explored. In terms of genre markers, one can observe that men's late-style narratives fall heavily back on the artist novel *par excellence*, the *Künstlerroman*, to which James Joyce had given "definitive treatment" (Beebe 260) with his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This archetype of the *male* young artist is so present, in writers' and readers' minds alike, that it exerts a considerable effect on the late-style narrative, even though its subject is youth rather than old age. As Kathleen Woodward states in *Aging and Its Discontents*, Western distinctions of age "ultimately and precipitously devolve into a single binary – into youth and old age. […]. Youth, represented by the youthful body, is good; old age, represented by the aging body, is bad" (6–7). The analysis of *The Development* by John Barth (Chapter 3) will examine this binary as well as the ageing artists' attempt to break free from an artistic creativity that depends on youth. The *Künstlerroman* also has an effect on women's late writing, but in a different way. What Abel, Hirsch and Langland state about the *Bildungsroman* genre is certainly also true here: "The sex of the protagonist modifies every aspect" (Introduction 5). In Chapter 4 on Karen Blixen's narratives "The Dreamers" and "Echoes," it will be explored how male and female *Künstlerroman* traditions – as well as the gendered late-style debate – are taken up by the female ageing author.

The generic approach to late-style narratives raises a number of interesting questions, some of which are related to gender. Considering the different patterns in male and female late-style narratives, one must ask: Is art gendered? Is *ageing* gendered? Is style – and specifically late style – gendered? And what about lateness as an attitude or an authorial stance behind the work? Yet, within the generic code of production, one must keep in mind what is also valid for the second, self-reflexive code of production: late-style theories have no *direct* bearing on the assessment of the text. Rather, meaning is produced by comparison with similar *literary* works. This is owed to the fact that these works, rather than being written in direct response to the scholarly late-style discourse,

33 McMullan lists Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen as two examples of women writers whose late work was explored by late style scholars. However, their treatment presents some problems: Woolf's late style is prominently linked to suicide. As to Austen, *Persuasion* can be considered late, but the later, unfinished *Sanditon* has "un-late qualities" again (17–18).

have begun to imitate *each other*. They thus become self-referential in the sense of referring to a *literary* late-style tradition, shaking off the seemingly outdated, traditional ideas of late-style philosophy.

Thus, in the contemporary literary world, an emancipation from late-art criticism and theory is taking place. Ageing authors express that *they* are the experts of late art – not the critics and the philosophers. In the following three chapters, it is therefore the individual authors' own view of late style that shall be of concern. Returning to the questions which introduce this chapter – the Hutcheons' provocative question as to why we should "bother" to theorize late style and elderly artists ("Historicizing" 58) – one can say that late style becomes a concern again once the written work is approached as the expression and communication of an authorial figure. This concern should be addressed in literary criticism as well as in ageing studies in general. For the former, disregarding late style would be as short-sighted as disregarding the peculiarities of youth in the *Künstlerroman*. Within the field of ageing studies, its pertinence is even higher, and the Hutcheons' claim that late-style theory is ageist (cf. "Late Style(s)") will be challenged. If critics wish to affirm the importance of creativity in a human life and determine its role for those who are near the end of it, late-style studies are the opposite of ageist. They emphasize the relevance of old-age art and support its endeavor to claim a space of its own.

3 Old Age, the Intruder: John Barth's Young and Old Artists

> [A] fictional character both exists and does not exist; he or she is a non-entity who is a somebody. […]. The embodiment longed for is of something outside language, beyond an author, but it is of course the author's 'voice' which is the utterance; language which is the totality of existence; text which is reality.
>
> (Waugh, *Metafiction* 90–91)

3.1 From the *Künstlerroman* to the Late-Style Narrative

John Barth's collection of short stories *The Development* (2008) usefully exemplifies what is at stake in late-style narratives written in response to the late-style debate. Firstly, Barth stands out for his ability to catch the *Zeitgeist*, and he is therefore a true representative of this group of twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers whose critical awareness urges them to reassess their style as they grow old, which results in a re-fashioning of their artistic persona. This is the *personal* code of the three codes of production proposed for a reading of late-style narratives in Chapter 2. The second reason is Barth's metafictional mode, which merges fiction and theory in one single text and not only shows the creative result of the author's awareness of age-related style issues, (i. e. the fictional narrative), but also provides some clues as to why and how these stories were conceived. As Stephen J. Burn suggests in his article on Barth's late phase, "the fourth-period Barth [i. e. the late Barth] is less an *example* of late style than it is *itself* a multi-volume theory of late style" (187, original italics). Hence, the work's *self-referentiality* is also one of the codes of production that late style allows for. Finally, by contrasting Barth's ageing-artist-types with the young artist-to-be Ambrose in Barth's much earlier *Künstlerroman*, the short story cycle *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), one can also gain insight into the way in which the creative processes in old age draw on earlier, 'youthful' definitions of artistic creativity

that were established in a *Künstlerroman*. Hence, *The Development* also makes use of the *generic* code of production.

Burn, who has to my knowledge published the only extensive article on John Barth's late style so far, identifies a strange dearth in later-Barth criticism. Scholars generally "prefer […] to re-read the earlier (and already intensively studied) books to locate new weights of emphasis in the already known" (180), he observes, and whereas for studies of the later Barth it seems necessary to consider his earlier works, "there is no corresponding responsibility for the critic of the early works to consider the late books" (181). Burn therefore proposes reading Barth's later works not as "a late return to an already complete fictional project, but rather as […] a new phase in Barth's career" (181). This new phase begins with *On with the Story* (1996) and carries on to his latest published work, *Every Third Thought: A Novel in Five Seasons* (2011). This chapter is less concerned with establishing a comprehensive account of Barth's late style and my choice of texts is therefore more selective. However, in order to explore the late-style narrative – here *The Development* – and its central figure, the ageing artist, it is necessary to have some kind of 'counternarrative' with a 'counterfigure,' with which the late-style narrative can be contrasted. Barth's early collection *Lost in the Funhouse*, a postmodern *Künstlerroman* with highly metafictional, theoretical messages, provides ideal conditions for such a comparison: it contains the same strong focus on creativity as *The Development* and therefore offers itself for comparison. Yet, with its youthful artist-protagonist, Ambrose, *Lost in the Funhouse* dwells at the opposite pole of the age spectrum.

The artist-protagonist's body is the point where young and old artists meet – and separate. For both, the young and the old artist, their body is a source of instability and unease, but the nature of the physical change that is taking place is quite different: the adolescent boy's body undergoes a process of growth and maturing whereas the ageing man is confronted with physical decline, illness and pain. Hence, both short story volumes, *Lost in the Funhouse* and *The Development*, are characterized by a strong focus on the physicality of their protagonists. However, whereas young Ambrose is initially just furnished with a body, which only gradually comes into contact with language and literature, the aged writers in *The Development* start out from the opposite pole: their initially stable position within, and stance towards, language and writing is threatened as old age sets in and their faculties begin to decline. Thus, they are forced to reassess their writing strategies and redefine the relationship between their physical existence and language. Decisive for their success or failure, it seems, is to what degree they are willing to diverge from previous conceptions of what their writing meant for them. Barth's aged artists thus make active use of pre-

viously fixed concepts of life and art in order to establish continuity in their life narratives, especially with regard to the transition to old age. As a result, Barth's theory of creativity in old age in the form of the late-style narrative falls heavily back on the *Künstlerroman*; meaning is produced through the contrast between the two genres.

The Development thus effectively illustrates how two deeply engrained notions play together in narratives that portray old artists: Firstly, the artist-protagonist is always already present in the archetype of the artist *per se*, the protagonist of the *Künstlerroman*, a figure that has been copied, expanded, and refuted by innumerable authors over the centuries, from Goethe's initial sketches of Wilhelm Meister to Joyce's portrait of Stephen Dedalus, and beyond. This image of the artist and his role in society has been so thoroughly impressed on writers', readers', and theorists' minds that there is virtually no escape from it.[1] In narratives about old artists, however, this archetype is constantly brought into conflict with the notion of late style, that is, with the idea that the artist's old age has a particular influence on his art. As Gordon McMullan has shown, theories of late style originated in German romanticism and found their way into English literature and criticism through the reassessment of Shakespeare's late plays towards the end of the 19th century (cf. *Shakespeare*). In the contemporary writers' awareness, and consequently in their late fiction, these two strong notions of the artist archetype and the idea of late style clash and interact to an extent that marks these works with their own, idiosyncratic attributes, both with regard to content and structure. In other words, narratives that portray ageing artists have a strong generic quality. Hence, this chapter on two of Barth's collections of short stories – one that shows the traits of a *Künstlerroman* and one that portrays several types of ageing writers – shall serve as an example of how late-style narratives grow out of the *Künstlerroman* but effectively turn against it, as they challenge the fixed notions of the 'artist as a young man.'

When in 1967, John Barth – already well known for his complex novels – published his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," he caught the spirit of the time. His remark that for an author "to be technically *out* of date is likely to be a genuine defect" (66, original italics) had a considerable impact on contempor-

1 All theoretical texts that deal with *Künstlerromane* acknowledge that the types of the male and the female *Künstlerroman* present basic differences in structure and content. At this point, the discussion of the *Künstlerroman* (or *Bildungsroman*, for that matter) is therefore limited to the male version. Issues of female creativity will be taken up and discussed in Chapter 4 on Karen Blixen's "The Dreamers" and "Echoes."

ary authors and theorists, and his call for novelty in form, especially concerning the novel, is still thought to be a manifesto of Postmodernism. Besides his strong focus on formal originality in this essay, Barth also describes the successful contemporary artist as one who turns "the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work" (71). It is hardly surprising, then, that Barth himself, well aware of the spirit of the time, in 1968 published a parodic *Künstlerroman* in the form of the short story cycle *Lost in the Funhouse*. Half a century after Joyce had given "definitive treatment to an archetype" (Beebe 260) with his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and had thus firmly set the standard of the adolescent artist, it was high time for a modification of the artist type, on the one hand, and for a reassessment of the form of the *Künstlerroman*, on the other. And in recent times, again, Barth seems to have sensed that the time is ripe for a new portrait of the artist: as the baby boomers are growing old, and the topic of old age has thoroughly flooded scientific research and the media, elderly protagonists have found their way into Barth's fictional world.

Although Barth's fiction has, over the years, become much more appreciated than his work as a literary critic and theorist, Barth's short stories and novels are so imbued with metafictional elements that they can be approached as theoretical works, too. As Waugh states in her influential theory of metafiction, "all of the different writers whom one could refer to as broadly 'metafictional' […] explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction" (2, original italics). Moreover, Berndt Clavier affirms:

> The value of Barth's art is […] not related to the capacity of his fiction to properly imitate an existing reality, to forge a link between word and world; rather the value must be inferred from the *critical work* it does in exposing the systems and structures that produce such links. (10, italics added)

Yet, to try to separate fiction from theory in these texts is not only an enterprise doomed to fail, but it would also result in a massive reduction of the works' impact. Indeed, it is precisely Barth's metafictional style that captures the *Zeitgeist*. In this respect, Barth's *The Development* not only portrays the 'artist as an old man' but it also theorizes and discusses issues of old age and creativity, that is, lateness and late style.

In taking up and exploring age-related topics, such as physical decline, death, and issues of creativity, Barth's latest works resemble those of many other elderly authors in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Yet, unlike some of his contemporaries, Barth does not resort to subjectivity and autobiog-

raphy in order to directly reveal the influences his own old age exerts on his writing. On the contrary, he approaches the theme of old age from a variety of perspectives in an attempt to convey a holistic view. The stories in *The Development* thus portray several elderly protagonists who live in a gated community and are all trying to come to terms with their age-related problems. Since they all have to deal with different 'symptoms' of old age, ranging from retirement from professional life, to loss of memory, illness, and the death of loved ones, their coping strategies are accordingly varied. Yet, they all have in common that they use writing, in one form or the other, to reassess and redefine their identity in old age. This gated community thus represents a microcosm of old age and functions as a laboratory for Barth to explore the relationship between old age and writing in a safe, fictional world. In this microcosm, Barth himself is only present in the form of one of the protagonists, George Newett, who carries some autobiographical traits and functions as Barth's alter ego. The image of the gated community – a neighborhood characterized by perfect organization and artificiality – not only represents the constructedness of the literary text, but the elderly residents' effort in maintaining their homes also reflects their attempt at preserving their identity in view of the inevitable decline and decay of their bodies, which is emphasized throughout the short story cycle.

The fact that Barth pays such close attention to the physicality of the ageing body mirrors and simultaneously modifies his strong concerns with the adolescent body in *Lost in the Funhouse.* Ambrose, the boy who is about to become an artist and gets lost in a funhouse, is the protagonist of the three 'Ambrose stories' in the volume, which have attracted most critical attention over the years. Ranging from Ambrose's experiences as an infant and a fourth-grader to the decisive family trip to the funfair as a teenager, these stories' events depict the boy's development in view of his fate to become an artist, and, in so doing, they carefully assess the role his immature body fulfills. The relationship between physical reality and language, between body and text, thus becomes a core issue in Ambrose's search for his artistic identity. Indeed, as will be suggested in the discussion of the 'Ambrose stories' below, *Lost in the Funhouse*, despite its parodic attitude towards the genre of the *Künstlerroman*, copies the traditional move of the artist *away* from reality and his turn towards the abstraction of art, thus simultaneously affirming psychological life-span theories proposing that artists in their early phases reject and transform, or even ignore, objective reality (Cohen-Shalev, "Self and Style" 296). In a similar way, in *The Development*, the elderly protagonists' physical realities are initially foregrounded through detailed descriptions of their declining faculties and health problems. Yet, in contrast, these ageing bodies are not easily converted into a coherent narrative: the

physical reality of the decaying body, illness and pain seem to resist narrative closure. Following life-span creativity research, one can easily discern the "[f]ragmentation by design, incompleteness, internal contradiction and emotional ambivalence loosen[ing] the boundaries between inner and outer realities" (Cohen-Shalev, "Self and style" 297), which Barth dramatizes in the opposition between the physical and the textual.

Yet, the fact that bodies – aged and pubescent – are marked by rapid change is not the only connection between *The Development* and *Lost in the Funhouse*. Both collections of short stories question and reassess the traditional roles of author and narrator: they search for the origin of fiction and they do so mainly through structural means. When young Ambrose is lost in the funhouse and finally decides to "construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator" (*Lost in the Funhouse* 97), he merges with his work of art, since a symbolic reading of the funhouse suggests that it represents literature.[2] Moreover, it is also the last time Ambrose appears as a *character*. As Zack Bowen points out, the remaining stories of the volume are

> projections of events and attitudes in the Ambrose narratives, and, as [Ambrose] becomes distanced in time and more overwhelmed by the problems of composition, we can see him identified with the self-conscious author-narrators of the later stories. (52)

Thus, a complete symbolization of the artist as protagonist takes place, since Ambrose's body literally and figuratively disappears in the literary funhouse as the stories unwind. For Ambrose, this means that, as a writer, instead of telling stories about himself, he will become the "secret operator" of funhouses – he will write fictional narratives (*Lost in the Funhouse* 97). In *Lost in the Funhouse*, therefore, one can observe a clear progression from reality to abstraction: Ambrose begins by narrating his own childhood and youth in chronological order and realist fashion and then digresses from his path as he "takes a wrong turn" in the funhouse (95). It is 'the right turn' for an artist in the *Künstlerroman*, however: as a prospective writer, he takes the decision to look at reality through the mirror of art.

In *The Development*, the methods for coming to terms with issues of creative production are more varied. Whereas some of the elderly writers, in a somewhat naïve manner, simply record what is going on in their community, others actively shape their life through writing. Whether their stories are images of their reality, or vice versa, is not always determinable. George Newett, who is the

2 This symbolic function of the funhouse has been pointed out by most critics (e. g. Ziegler, Bowen, and Tharpe).

only true artist-type in the volume, makes a reverse development in comparison with young Ambrose: while Ambrose started out with the narration of his life story, Newett begins with fictional accounts of elderly people in his neighborhood. (Not until the fourth story, "The Bard Award," is Newett featured as a protagonist, although he has made an occasional appearance as a character before). Yet, he must soon realize that these stories are somehow unsuitable to his purpose and he begins to write about *himself* as a character. The result is a highly complex and metafictional text, in which Newett takes the role of both producer and product. Hence, whereas *Lost in the Funhouse* shows the process of abstracting the story from its author's life, one can observe the opposite structure in *The Development*: as an aged artist, narrator Newett sets out from fiction and turns towards autobiography.

The active use of content-related and structural means from the *Künstlerroman* in the late-style narrative – of course not only in Barth's oeuvre[3] – leaves no room for doubt that a thorough knowledge of the *Künstlerroman* as a genre is a prerequisite for critically studying and assessing late-style narratives. Hence, the discussion of *Lost in the Funhouse* below shall serve two functions: on the one hand, it shall provide an overview of the structure and themes of the *Künstlerroman*, most especially in contrast to the *Bildungsroman*. On the other hand, it shall discuss how *Lost in the Funhouse* portrays the artist and his stance towards language and textuality. In this way, the section below shall disclose some of the early Barth's poetics regarding issues of literary creativity – a poetics that will be challenged and revised in Barth's late-style narrative.

3.2 The Artist, His Body, and the Text: *Lost in the Funhouse*

The fact that lifting the cover of John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* resembles unlocking the door to a labyrinth of infinite theoretical possibilities becomes apparent when viewing the great number of different critical interpretations and opinions. Indeed, Barth's 1968 short story cycle is a tough nut to crack. Bowen, for instance, warns that Barth's fiction "offers so many opportunities for discussion, explication, and critical speculation that the reader scarcely knows where to begin" (xi). Yet, he does not mean to discourage any critical activity; rather, he stresses the importance of choosing a focus for one's approach to what he calls Barth's "theoretical centerpiece" (xi). Here, special at-

3 Consider, for instance, the various correspondences between the first and last of Philip Roth's Zuckerman novels, in which the same characters appear and the same topics are taken up.

tention will be paid to the relationship between the body und the text. On the one hand, this will provide valuable insights into the way in which a *Künstlerroman* uses structural means to define the creative act, and, on the other, it will show how art is legitimated and assigned a superior position with regard to reality.

As Meuthen remarks with a critical undertone, the *Künstlerroman* is often approached as a subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* in which art's sole function is to support the formation of the protagonist on his path to achieve a stable and mature self (4).[4] However, *Künstlerromane* clearly differ from their related genre in their structure. As Gohlman states, the *Bildungsroman* is "a novel in which the hero actively shapes himself both from within and without, thus achieving a *personal* harmony or balance between himself and the world" (13, original italics). In the *Künstlerroman*, in turn, the artist-protagonist is characterized precisely by his inability to cope with society, as Seret explains:

> The fate of the artist is to be ignored, misunderstood, or condemned by the same society to which he has offered his gifts. After many disappointments and frustrations his instincts force him to reject this society, to turn away from those destined to wound and possibly annihilate him. […]. Ultimately the artist must turn to himself, look into his soul, draw upon his imagination, and create his own world. (3)

It is evident that this distinction might result in a self-fulfilling prophecy if one were to use it as the sole rule for differentiating between *Künstlerromane* and *Bildungsromane*. However, more often than not, critics impose the social goal of the *Bildungsroman* upon narratives that portray adolescent artists, and topics of literary-theoretical value are thereby marginalized. In *Lost in the Funhouse*, such studies foreground Ambrose's relationship with his father and his older brother, for instance, rather than discussing Ambrose's way of entering the symbolic domain of language.

What is also easily overlooked is that Barth's use of the coming-of-age theme is mainly parodic. The author himself, in his *Friday Book*, affirms that most of his earlier works "are in the genre the Germans call *Erziehungsromane*: 'up-bringing-novels,' education novels," but that his interest in this theme is confined to its use as "a vehicle for satire or an object of parody" (132, original italics). Indeed, Barth's very set-up of the *Künstlerroman* in *Lost in the Funhouse* is par-

4 My own translation from German. The original passage reads: "Von Interesse sei die Kunst in den so bezeichneten Romanen nur als 'Bildungsgut,' als Medium eines Entwicklungsprozesses, an dessen Ende bei erfolgreichem Verlauf die gereifte Persönlichkeit, ein stabiles, charakterlich gefestigtes Ich stehe" (Meuthen 4).

odic: instead of a full-length novel covering the childhood and the adolescence of its protagonist, Barth presents us with a set of loosely connected short stories, which defies traditional notions of plot development. Thus, *Lost in the Funhouse*, rather than an enactment of the *Künstlerroman* genre, is a postmodernist, critical discussion of a genre that seems to have become obsolete. Writing about the postmodernist literary environment, Zima claims that the *Künstlerroman* in its late-modern form has no existence anymore. In an environment marked by irony and critical self-reflection, writers are aware that the development of the young artist that is supposed to discover art and recognize its truth value can only be rendered from an ironic distance, that is, it can only be *referred to* in the form of parody or pastiche (323).[5]

In this respect, the short story is the perfect instrument for parody because it has no need to develop a story at full length. Writing about postmodern coming-of-age stories, Flower aptly describes the difference between the novel and the short story as follows:

> [T]he short-story writer selects a moment, a critical turning point, and only claims its lifelong importance. But that moment can be more piercingly final than anything that happens in a novel. Novelists devote hundreds of pages to the long ordeal of innocent kids and confused adolescents seeking their adult identities. The short story winnows it down to its essence, seeking an absolute pivotal truth, and leaves the rest to the imagination. By its very brevity and selectivity, the story says that whatever happened later, indeed all subsequent experience, is irrelevant. (xiii–xiv)

Thus, the short story, rather than extensively *narrating* events, only *refers* to events, much like the postmodern *Künstlerroman*, which, according to Zima, can only 'quote' previously established concepts of art (323). Moreover, since Barth's short stories are highly metafictional, they constantly refer to one another and to themselves. This structure of collection-internal intertextuality and meta-discourse becomes the main means of expression in *Lost in the Funhouse*, as Tharpe asserts: "[f]orm – form itself – *is* the content" (10, original italics).

This strong focus on form becomes especially important in view of what can be considered the central paradox of the postmodern *Künsterroman*: on the one

5 My own translation from German. The original passage reads: "In diesem von Ironie und kritischer Selbstreflexion geprägten Kontext kann weder ein Künstlerroman noch eine Künstlernovelle im Sinn der Spätmoderne […] entstehen. Die Künstler- und Kunstthematik kann nur noch parodistisch angegangen werden, weil der nachmoderne Autor weiss, dass er die Entwicklung zum Künstler und die Entdeckung der Kunst als Wahrheit und Wert nicht mehr im Ernst darstellen, sondern nur noch distanziert-ironisch in Pastiche und Parodie *zitieren* kann" (Zima 323, original italics).

hand, as Zima affirms, the protagonist's decision to become an artist must be parodied and therefore rendered ironic (if not ridiculous) (323), but, on the other hand, the medium to do so is a work of art, whose value must not be undermined. The difficulty in 'postmodernizing' the genre therefore lies in reforming its content and structure, but simultaneously retaining its traditional affirmation of the value of art. In *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth's solution to render this paradox is the structure of the short story cycle. Whereas, in the single stories, Ambrose (like several other artists) is portrayed as an ironic character, belittled by the implied author's voice and by the readership, the structure of the cycle as a whole takes over, as I will suggest, the genre's traditional justification of art. For Maurice Beebe, for instance, all *Künstlerromane* are "stories which tell how they came to be written" (v). Interestingly, *Lost in the Funhouse* not only retains the traditional *Künstlerroman's* justification of art, but it also adopts the structurally important pivot that marks the protagonist's decision to become an artist – namely his sexual initiation. Flower's claim that short stories focus on a "critical turning point" and suggest that "all subsequent experience is irrelevant" (xiii–xiv) therefore perfectly matches Barth's postmodern *Künstlerroman*: Ambrose's physical and sexual development and his initiation into the domain of language both conclude in the title story, at the end of which he merges with the literary funhouse. The way the protagonist's body and language relate to each other in the three Ambrose stories thus follows a direct path towards his decision to become an artist.

This translation of the artist's physical body into language – the narration of his life story – is presented as a process of coming to terms with physical unease. From his very birth, Ambrose's body is portrayed as a source of problems, but his discontent with his physical existence is gradually alleviated by language. In "Ambrose His Mark" – which is the first Ambrose story – the protagonist is systematically denied his basic physical needs, as his mother refuses to breast-feed him when he is hungry and frequently ignores his crying. The use of language, in this first account, manifests itself in Ambrose's naming, which the family neglect for a long time: "[b]aptism was delayed, postponed, anon forgot" (*Lost in the Funhouse* 15). As a consequence, Ambrose is, in the beginning, only furnished with a body, which is already marked as an artist's through a red mole in the shape of a bee. The family eventually name the boy after Saint Ambrose, who is supposed to have been a great speaker due the fact that a swarm of bees gathered around his face when he was a baby. Hence, the story seems to confirm the natural connection between body and language in matching the birthmark on his skin with his name. However, when the first-person narrator Ambrose eventually states that "[he] and [his] sign are neither one nor quite two" (34),

he recognizes that the relationship between world and word is a more complex one.

Whereas, in this first story, Ambrose has no agency in his naming, he can, at least, verbally manipulate and assimilate the physical sensations of his body to a certain extent in the second story, "Water Message." As a fourth-grader, Ambrose is frequently beaten up by his classmates. Moreover, his body constitutes a constant source of malaise and shame because he not only feels misunderstood by his environment but also lacks the necessary control over his body to gain the respect of his schoolmates. His first attempts to come to terms with these humiliations by putting them into words fail, however, as he cannot yet narrate the events to his satisfaction:

> This afternoon he had planned to tell [his mother] the truth of the matter [about the incidents at school] in an off-hand way with a certain sigh that he could hear clearly in his fancy, but in the telling his sigh stuck in his throat, and such a hurt came there that he remarked to himself: "this is what they mean when they say they have *a lump in their throat*." (42–43, original italics)

Although he has carefully planned it, Ambrose cannot render a perfect account of his humiliating experiences due to the lack of control he exerts over his immature artist-body, and he is thus thrown back upon the materiality of his existence. Nevertheless, he experiences this very materiality through language: "This is what they mean when they say they have *a lump in their throat*" (42–43, original italics). Language thus seems to precede experience in that Ambrose can only gather what is happening with his body if he can match it to a verbal expression. In typical postmodernist fashion, reality thus seems to be subordinated to language.

In this phase of Ambrose's development, language is closely linked to truth and knowledge. Interestingly, in his daydreams, Ambrose succeeds perfectly well in uttering the phrase "the truth of the matter is" (46; 53), which previously brought him close to tears when talking to his mother. Since he cannot stand "the truth" in real life, he creates his own truth in his fictional daydreams, in which he is a strong, fully grown man without the limitations that his immature body imposes upon him in reality. Hence, the text implies that mastering one's body – physically and verbally – is linked to some kind of truth-value. Truth, therefore, is closely connected to physical and verbal maturity, which includes sexual maturity. Indeed, Ambrose feels that adults and older children possess some knowledge – sexual knowledge – that he does not have access to, and which he tries to elicit from them. Hence, Ambrose is faintly aware that sexual knowledge is the key to becoming an adult, which entails leaving his immature, insufficient

body behind and entering the domain of language. It is highly ironic, yet perfectly typical of Barth, that Ambrose's initiation to sexual knowledge concurs with his decision to become an artist in the title story "Lost in the Funhouse" – which will, in the typical fashion of the *Künstlerroman*, draw him away from a normal sexual and social development.

Indeed, it is precisely the function that sexual initiation fulfills in the *Künstlerroman* which marks it as different from its related genre, the *Bildungsroman*. In the *Bildungsroman*, sexual initiation is one of the important rites of passage – if not the key moment – that leads to the protagonist's integration into society. In contrast, for the artist in the *Künstlerroman*, his first sexual experience is associated with his decision to become an artist, which draws him *away* from society. The protagonist's movement from society towards art thereby becomes a symbolic means to affirm the superiority of art over life and to justify the existence of the narrative itself. The loss of sexual innocence is particularly suitable for such a symbolic use for several reasons: Firstly, coming of age is not only equivalent to change, but also to progress. In this way, coming of age always carries a positive connotation because it signifies the achievement of a higher level of understanding. Moreover, youth is particularly suitable to be used as a symbol because its association with innocence turns it into an empty container that can be filled with theoretical concepts, as Kenneth Millard explains: "'[I]nnocence' is an idea that can be appropriated, imagined, and deployed as a means to dramatise in an urgent narrative form those challenges that adult novelists perceive to be the most pressing concerns of their day" (13). If the protagonist's initial innocence is the crucial feature that allows for his symbolic use in the first place, then his loss of (sexual) innocence in the course of the narrative becomes the main instrument to signify change, or progress. However, there is a further reason why sexual initiation is pivotal in any artist novel. As Beebe notes, sexual procreation is in constant conflict with artistic creation, which results in the "divided nature of the artist": "[t]he man seeks personal fulfilment in experience, while the artist-self desires freedom from the demands of life" (13). The artist-to-be can either spend his creative energy in art, *or* in life (17). However, if life experience as the source of inspiration is a premise for art, "the artist […] runs the risk of dissipating creative energy in the mere process of living and therefore proving incapable of transforming experience into art" (18). Beebe thus suggests that sexual activity absorbs the creative force of the artist, drawing him towards life, and away from art.

This traditional connection between artistic excellence and sexual continence, which has been verbally epitomized in the conflict between 'the pen and the penis,' might well have had religious motives, at least originally. In Western

history, most early poets were monks and were bound to celibacy, the purpose of which is, according to the Vaticanist *Code of Canon Law*, to ensure the clerics' full attention to religious matters:

> Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are bound to celibacy which is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and are able to dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and humanity. ("The Obligations and Rights of Clerics" Can. 277 § 1)

Since these early monks' writing was usually limited to religious topics, their sexual continence was supposed to be beneficial for both their artistic work and their religious salvation. However, unlike the artist-to-be in the *Künstlerroman*, the monks would probably not abstain from sexual intercourse and normal social life and choose solitude for the sole purpose of poetic excellence. The modern *Künstlerroman*, of course, being an invention of eighteenth-century German literature, can hardly be directly linked to the early Catholic tradition of versifying monks.[6] However, the connection between the artist-protagonist's

6 The aim of this chapter is not to discover the roots of the genre of the *Künstlerroman*. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the connection between sexual abstinence and poetic excellence seems to be much older than the establishment of the *Künstlerroman* genre with and after Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Although the *Künstlerroman* is thought to be "a German invention congenial to German taste and temperament" (Seret 144), the artist-protagonist's withdrawal from society and his sexual abstinence constitute a motif with much earlier roots than the German literary period of Storm and Stress. Indeed, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, which dates back to the eighth century AD, tells of the life of the 7th-century poet Cædmon, who was the earliest English poet we know of. According to Bede, Cædmon was a simple shepherd who felt ashamed of his inability to sing and make verses and therefore often left the circle of his peers before it was his turn to sing. After he acquired the gift of poetry in a dream, he was led to the monastery (present-day Whitby Abbey), where the learned men were deeply impressed by the purity and excellence of his verses. As a result, the abbess persuaded him to withdraw from secular life and to dedicate himself to monkhood (Beda 397–399), which also involved sexual abstinence, according to the *Regula Benedicti* (cf. Gleba 28). The structure of Bede's account – from Cædmon's initial inability to socialise, through his mystical inspiration, to his final decision to join the monastery – shows a surprising similarity to the modern *Künstlerroman*. Moreover, Bede specifically highlights the merging of the Anglo-Saxon secular poetry form with Roman-Catholic religious topics, which gave rise to a unique Anglo-Saxon tradition of poetry. Hence, it could be argued that Bede's account of the poet Cædmon, although written in Latin, is the earliest known *English Künstlerroman*. Indeed, the Cædmon story – despite many scholarly claims that some of its elements are common in folk stories around the world – was unique in its time, which Lester convincingly expounds in "The Cædmon Story and Its Analogues."

abstinence from sexuality, on the one hand, and religious celibacy, on the other, cannot be ignored, since both aim at minimizing the degree of distraction that could result from sexual activity.

Despite this competition between procreation and artistic creation, it will be suggested that sexual activity – precisely because of its association with creation – enhances art in the *Künstlerroman*. In a symbolic reading, the artist-protagonist travels from life towards art, and, simultaneously, from innocence towards knowledge. Knowledge, in this connection, always encompasses *sexual* knowledge. Thus, sexual activity can also be seen as a direct symbol for artistic creation – not only because it may result in offspring and hence suggests the possibility of a *product*. More importantly, sexual activity represents the contact with the traditionally female muse and thus allows for inspiration and artistic production. Before the first sexual contact, in a symbolic reading, the artist-protagonist is still 'innocent,' or inexperienced as far as art is concerned; he still belongs exclusively to the domain of life. Only the loss of his innocence provides access to the domain of art, as the female muse inspires the artist with a whole set of new possibilities of how to understand life through art. Inspiration precedes artistic production as much as sexual intercourse precedes birth. It is no coincidence that Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* begins with the literary-philosophical musings of a spermatozoon on his way to the ovum. This first story of the cycle sets the tone and suggests that the text to follow is not a coming-of-age story in realist fashion. The first sexual experience of a protagonist in a *Künstlerroman*, then, does not simply represent one of the developmental tasks in youth, or one of the rites of passage towards adulthood. Sexual initiation is the point where the artist-protagonist learns to negotiate between reception and production, that is, between experiencing life and creating art.

In the title story of *Lost in the Funhouse*, therefore, Ambrose's sexual initiation and his eventual disappearance in the funhouse must be read symbolically. That Ambrose, at the funfair, appears quite naïve regarding sexuality might be surprising in view of the fact that he lost his sexual innocence three years prior to the trip to Ocean City. Yet his reluctance to engage with adult life is in fact compatible with a consideration of the story as a *Künstlerroman*. In a symbolic reading, Ambrose's first sexual experience, rather than initiating him into the secrets of adulthood, has carried him further away from life, as he has crossed the borderline between life and art. Not only is Ambrose unable to experience the moment normally, but he also feels an "odd detachment" (84) from his own body, as he recalls during the trip to Ocean City: "He […] recalled how, standing beside himself with awed impersonality in the reeky heat, he'd stared the while at an empty cigar box in which Uncle Karl kept stone-cutting chisels […]. [H]e

heard his mind take notes upon the scene: *This is what they call* passion. *I am experiencing it*" (78; 84, original italics). Ambrose cannot but experience passion through language because his mind focuses on the *narration* of the event, and he feels he is "standing beside himself" (78). This detachment, according to Beebe, is typical of the protagonist of a *Künstlerroman*:

> We may discover variations of the archetype […], but the main characteristics of the artist are unchanged from the first of the artist-novels to those of our time. Among those characteristics, we have seen, is that ability to look at the self from a distance which separates the man who observes and sets up a conflict between the urge to "live" and the temptation to seek solitude. (65)

Heide Ziegler, in turn, argues that Ambrose's detachment in this moment (and also in the moments of religious initiation and social initiation in his Boy Scout group) frightens him because he already realizes that he is a fictional character rather than a normal person (*Ironie ist Pflicht* 166). Ambrose may well be unable to experience these moments normally because he is gradually leaving the domain of life and entering the domain of the text. However, it is only in the moment of his *sexual* initiation that he begins to create an alternative reality and to replace his physical body with language, as he thinks "*I am experiencing it*" despite the fact that he does not feel anything (84, original italics).

The cigar box that catches Ambrose's eye in the moment of his sexual initiation – although critics have paid little attention to it so far – comes to be the object with the greatest symbolic value in the story besides the funhouse. The stone-cutting chisels in the cigar box, probably still from Ambrose's grandfather (who was an engraver), are effectively writing tools and therefore an artist's instruments of expression. It is thus no coincidence that Ambrose's sight is caught by the chisel box precisely at the moment of his first sexual experience because he suddenly becomes aware that his fate draws him away from participation in life, towards art. He steps into the role of the observer, who stands apart from life "with awed impersonality" (82) and takes notes in his mind.[7] Apart from their function as artistic instruments, the chisels in the cigar box are also powerful phallic symbols, and this symbolism goes beyond the traditional pun of the pen and the penis. Alhough Ziegler notes that "in *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth will prefer to play on the homonymity of 'pen' and 'penis,' […] that is, he will no longer respect the borderline between word and deed" (*John Barth*

7 This echoes Joyce's often-quoted description in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (181).

33), Barth *does* draw a line between artistic creation and natural procreation. Ambrose cannot experience sexuality precisely because he was born an artist. At this stage, he is still a boy, but he will have to decide which of the "tools of productivity" (33) he is going to choose, the pen or the penis.

Three years later, in Ocean City, Ambrose is completing this task as he disappears in the funhouse. Barth's open admiration for Borges, whose work is considered the main reference for literary labyrinths, makes a symbolic reading of the funhouse almost mandatory.[8] Nevertheless, the consequences of the protagonist getting lost in the textual funhouse are far from obvious. Zima even writes that Ambrose, at the end, finds his way out of the funhouse and returns home with his family (324).[9] Ziegler, in turn, views the protagonist's disappearance as the loss of his identity, as he ceases to be a character and becomes the narrator of his own story (*Ironie ist Pflicht* 166). Focusing on the protagonist's body reveals an additional meaning of the funhouse: not only does it represent literature, or fiction, but it also turns into a signifier for the body itself: it is the cultural image of the natural body. This is made apparent at the very beginning of the title story: "For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose, it is *a place of fear and confusion*" (72, original italics). As has become evident in the previous two Ambrose stories, the young artist struggles with his physical existence. Hence, the funhouse as a representation of the body might be fun for lovers, who will experience sexuality in a normal way, but not for the artist-type, for whom the funhouse resembles a threatening, gigantic human body. The entrance of the funhouse, called the "mouth" (89, 92), is evidently a feature of the human face, and the "tumbling barrel" right after the entry resembles a huge vagina where "the girls were upended and their boyfriends and others could see up their dresses, if they cared to" (89). Barthian humor comes in as Ambrose realizes that "to get through [the tumbling barrel] expeditiously was not the point" (92). In the funhouse, Ambrose is thus forced to learn what 'the point' about the human body is. He is confronted with the cultural image of the body, which is imbued with sexual meaning.

8 In the foreword to the 1988 Anchor Books edition of *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth writes: "It was about this time that I came across the writings of the great Argentine Jorge Luis Borges […]. [I]t was the happy marriage of form and content in Borges's *ficciones* – the way he regularly turned his narrative means into part of his message – that suggested how I might try something similar, in my way and with my materials" (vii).

9 "Barths dreizehnjährigem Held Ambrose gelingt es zwar, das Funhouse-Labyrinth von Ocean City zu verlassen und mit seiner Familie den Heimweg anzutreten; aber er kennt nunmehr sein Schicksal als Künstler: Er wird – wie Barth selbst – literarische Funhouses oder Juxhäuser für Leser konstruieren" (Zima 324).

The symbol of the funhouse with its two figurative meanings 'body' and 'text' thus becomes the end point of the fusion between the protagonist and the text by which he is represented. Ambrose does not *remain in* the funhouse as the protagonist of his fiction; rather, he *becomes* the funhouse as the text becomes his body of words. The adolescent's natural body is thereby replaced with its cultural image, which, however, does not consist in a satisfactory solution. Elisabeth von Samsonow recognizes the difficulty that arises from using a cultural discourse to explain the enigmatic, natural body:

> The history of the conscious transformation of the natural body into an artificial one – which was supposed to be nothing less than the process of *merely understanding* the natural body – has been going on for quite some time now: for about two thousand years. However, the artificial body, which was originally the symbolic gain in this process of understanding, presents itself as equally ambiguous as the former natural body: in short, as difficult. (157, original italics)[10]

Ambrose thus vainly wishes for "a perfect funhouse," where "you'd be able to go only one way" and where "getting lost would be impossible" (*Lost in the Funhouse* 85). In this perfect body of words, "the doors and halls would work […] like valves in veins" (85) – which again affirms the funhouse's function of symbolizing the human body. Unlike his brother Peter, who has "a one-track mind" (89) and merely follows the path intended by society, Ambrose "is off the track" (83) and goes astray. As a consequence, his only option is "to construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator" (97). This forced decision to become an author and remain in the domain of literature, however, also separates him from life, and he understands that he will henceforth not be "among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed" (97).

This ideal stage where text and body become one at the end of the *Künstlerroman*, however, is as unstable as the natural body, which is always subject to change. Although the three Ambrose stories follow the traditional *Künstlerroman* in that they portray the artist's inability to integrate into society and his decision to become an artist, and the structure of the three stories takes up the symbolic function of the *Künstlerroman* in affirming the superiority of art, this

10 My own translation from German. The original text reads: "Die Geschichte der absichtsvollen Umformatierung des natürlichen Körpers in einen künstlichen – was in sich selbst nichts anderes sein hätte sollen als der Prozess des *Verstehens selbst* dieses natürlichen Körpers – dauert nun schon einige Zeit an: etwa zweitausend Jahre. Der künstliche Körper, ursprünglich der symbolische Hauptgewinn im Körperverstehen, stellt sich aber als ebensowenig eindeutig dar wie der ehemalige natürliche, kurz: als schwierig" (von Samsonow 175, original italics).

conclusion cannot hold. The peak of abstraction, where language takes over and tries to represent reality, comes with a number of consequences that undermine the *Künstlerroman's* primary goal. As soon as Ambrose disappears as a character and turns into a neutral narrator – that is, when he ceases to write stories about *himself* – his art loses its connection with reality and turns into a meaningless play with language.

This meaninglessness that results from abstraction is further explored in the story "Title," in which the narrator asks himself: "Can nothing be made meaningful?" (106). The interruption of the connection between language and reality leads to an increasing self-consciousness, in which the story loses itself as in a vicious circle. In "Title," the narrator decides to write "the story of our [his and his wife's] life" by just "fill[ing] in the blank" (105). After several pages of unsatisfactorily accumulating words and phrases,[11] he concludes in a fantastic monologue that brilliantly epitomizes the postmodern dissatisfaction with language and literature:

> [T]he fact is that people still lead lives, mean and bleak and brief as they are, briefer than you think, and people have characters and motives that we divine more or less inaccurately from their appearance, speech, behaviour, and the rest, […] and what goes on between them is still not only the most interesting but the most important thing in the bloody murderous world, pardon the adjectives. And that my dear is what writers have got to find ways to write about in this adjective adjective hour of the ditto ditto same noun as above, or their, that is to say our, accursed self-consciousness will lead them, that is to say us, to here it comes, say it straight out, I'm going to, say it in plain English for once, that's what I'm leading up to […].
> Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness. (113)

The problem, as becomes apparent from the above quote, is that literature, once it is entirely abstracted and disconnected from life, becomes utterly useless. For what is the use of creating and consuming narrative fiction if this fiction is reduced to gimmick, to mere wordplay that lacks any reference in real life? The role of language to provide access to reality – in however a reductionist approach – and thereby facilitate the understanding of the human experience must be seriously questioned but the yearning for precisely this representative and explanatory function of literature remains intact. Hence, the narrator in "Title," in the passage above, still tries to establish references to the outer world ("people still lead lives") but these references have an increasing tendency to connect to words and concepts *within* his own text ("ditto ditto same noun as above") or to

11 For a thorough analysis of "Title," see Ziegler (*Ironie ist Pflicht* 181–189).

refer to concepts within the language medium itself ("in this adjective adjective hour"). In the end, the narrator is trapped in the 'abhorred self-consciousness' of his own text, which cannot establish any connection to reality anymore, not even to the writer's own life, which he set out to portray in the first place.

The core problem of how to create a fictional self-portrait is explored in several further stories – without any satisfactory results. In "Life Story," for instance, a writer decides "to tell his tale from start to finish in a conservative, "realistic," unself-conscious way" (116), featuring himself as a protagonist who believes himself to be a fictional character. The resulting confusion between author, narrator, and character leads, again, to very 'un-unself-conscious' theoretical abstractions, until the narrator realizes that "he could not after all be a character in a work of fiction inasmuch as such a fiction would be of an entirely different character from what he thought of as fiction" (129). This awareness, together with his conviction that "the story of his life was a work of fact," (129) shows that the fictional medium is, after all, inappropriate for his self-portrait. Thus, the problem remains the same: how to find, in the aftermath of modernism, a literary form that is suitable for a portrait of the artist? If complete abstraction leads to meaninglessness, and for a near-realism as in "Life Story," the fictional medium proves unsuitable, what is left?

Surprisingly, the last story of the series, "Anomymiad," returns to a first-person narrator and to a kind of realism: a nameless minstrel, marooned on an island, tells the story of his life by writing it on the skin of the last goat on the island. The temporal linearity and completeness of his '*Künstlerroman*,' which begins in his youth and ends at the time when he is writing, challenges the complicated theoretical discussion inherent in the earlier stories: Are Ambrose's anxiety and his struggle with his physical existence exaggerated? Are the stories' complex structures necessary? Is language, after all, nevertheless suitable to portray reality, and the fictional medium but a reflection of this reality? Yet, and more importantly, the simplicity of "Anonymiad" is utterly disappointing. The minstrel's lack of passion stands in stark contrast to Ambrose's involvement and excitement, when he imagines how he will construct the perfect funhouse: The minstrel has "[l]ong since […] ceased to care whether this [story] is found and read or lost in the belly of a whale" (200). "Will anyone have learnt [the story's] name? Will everyone? No matter" (201). In "Anonymiad," readers meet an artist-protagonist who has become so uninterested in, and disappointed with, his own life that he does not even care to reveal his name. His tale resembles a list of events that cannot provoke more than an occasional smile and much more frequent yawning.

The difference between Ambrose's involvement and the minstrel's boredom is reflected in the fact that few critical voices deal with "Anonymiad," whereas the amount of criticism published on the Ambrose stories is huge. The structurally challenging narratives that expose (and perhaps exaggerate) the problems of reality and fiction, of selfhood and representation, are closer to our everyday reality than one would suppose. Undoubtedly, Barth has established a new standard, as he has truly adapted the *Künstlerroman* to the time and taste of postmodernism.

3.3 Trial and Error: *The Development*

Whereas John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* circles around questions of reality and representation in the postmodern literary environment, *The Development* centers on the function that literature performs in mediating the crushing effects of old age. Barth's strategy in coming to terms with old age in writing seems to be one of trial and error. The laboratory of the gated community with its elderly residents allows for a great variety of test persons – the protagonists of the individual stories – and the degree to which Barth makes them fail in their attempt to deal with their declining faculties through writing is, at first sight, almost cynical, were it not for the genuine feeling of empathy that permeates the tragic stories of these writers' ill fortune. Barth's treatment of his protagonists results in a carefully balanced mixture of ironic distance and emotional involvement, which produces a certain unease because readers are left in a position where they constantly have to make decisions, many of them related to emotional response: Shall we read the texts as comedies or tragedies? Shall we laugh or cry? Are we even allowed to? Are there ethical restrictions? Is the voice, the tone, ironic, sarcastic, or cynical? And, more importantly: Whose voice is it anyway? The narrator's, the internal, fictional author's, or John Barth's own voice?

Such questions are not easy to tackle – and less so because Barth manages to present the protagonist's actions as simultaneously ironic and heroic: his elderly characters seem to wage an impossible battle against their inexorable old age and death. The two characters whose writing strategies are most clearly misguided are Dick Felton ("Toga Party") and Tim Manning ("Peeping Tom"; "Assisted Living"). George Newett, in turn, who later in the volume appears as the protagonist and narrator of the stories "Teardown," "The Bard Award," "The End," and "Rebeginning," and who closely resembles John Barth in his life circumstances, devises a more effective method when dealing with his advancing

age through writing. It comes as no surprise that Newett's success rests on his willingness to "try and err" – to write and rewrite his stories in the search for an appropriate style. Yet, his superior approach is dependent on the two former characters' failure, and this is why Dick Felton and Tim Manning constitute a substantial part of Newett's own strategy to 'write' his old age. If it were not for Felton's and Manning's ineffective methods, Newett's own writing would hardly be perceived as felicitous. Through the work's structure of trial and error, however, Newett ends up as the one who succeeds, and his hierarchical position eventually extends to John Barth himself, whose own writing is thereby legitimated.

3.4 Death and Dementia: Writing to Forget and to Remember Old Age

The characters Dick Felton and Tim Manning (the latter being a narrator as well) represent two of the most important limitations of any life narrative: death and dementia. Indeed, any attempt at constructing a coherent life story requires at least two premises: experience and memory. Hence, by creating two characters that lack precisely these premises – Felton commits suicide and Manning suffers from Alzheimer's disease – Barth prepares almost impossible laboratory conditions for his test persons. No wonder, then, that these two characters are unsuccessful in using their writing for the purpose of coming to terms with their old age. However, to take the enterprise of the old-age narrative to its limit is precisely their function, and to fail in their attempt is their prescribed goal. In this way, Barth creates two negative points of reference outside the limitations of narrative that will prepare the ground for main narrator George Newett, who is to follow with a more successful writing strategy. Moreover, the stories about Felton and Manning also serve to raise awareness of the problems that arise when old age is turned into narrative. Whereas Manning's stories center on the paradoxical structure of autobiography, Felton's story shows how narrative control and closure are closely linked to death, and that this must undermine the text's purpose of affirming life in old age.

Dick Felton and his wife Susan appear prominently in the second story of the volume, "Toga Party," and their writing strategy is to continually review and revise their wills. It seems evident that this activity will hardly cushion the impact of their ageing but, quite on the contrary, directly lead to their deaths. However, Felton feels too uncomfortable about his approaching old age to deal with it directly. Being in his mid-seventies, he is for the first time confronted

with the unpleasant aspects of his advanced age and has, "by his own acknowledgement become rather stick-in-the-muddish, not so much *depressed* by the prospect of their imminent old age as *subdued* by it, de-zested, his get up and go all but gotten up and gone" (28, original italics). Although Felton and his wife live quite comfortably in their own house and are both still in considerably good health, he cannot get used to the prospects of old age. Hence, Felton's effort to stay positive constantly drifts off into the negative, and reports of the Feltons' own "good life, indeed" and their "[c]ordially affectionate" relationship with their children and grandchildren (28) are succeeded by long lists of the couple's past and present illnesses:

> Dick had required bypass surgery in his mid-sixties, and Sue an ovariectomy and left-breast lumpectomy in her mid menopause. Both had had cataracts removed, and Dick had some macular degeneration – luckily of the less aggressive, "dry" variety – and mild hearing loss in his left ear, as well as being constitutionally overweight despite periodic attempts at dieting. (28–29)

Hence, although the Feltons are wealthy enough to enjoy retirement in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, they cannot ignore the gradual decline of their ageing bodies, which intrudes upon their life narrative. Instead of trying to adapt to these unpleasant circumstances of old age, however, the Feltons can only think of approaching death.

Such a focus on physical decline, illness and death as permeates all of *The Development* is fairly common in fictional works that feature old protagonists, and it has therefore attracted some criticism. Although Woodward insists that "[i]n thinking about old age, we must think about the increasing biological vulnerability of the body" (*Aging* 20), one has to ask whether old age should really almost exclusively be defined in terms of the ageing body. Yet, the way in which these narratives "invoke the body as the prime determinant of elders' destinies" (Waxman, *To Live in the Center of the Moment* 8) is a highly stylized literary convention rather than a reflection of reality, and as such it is endowed with a double function: on the one hand, these descriptions of the protagonists' physical decline serve as a label, by which a work of art points out its preoccupation with issues of old age, and, on the other hand, physical change functions as a trigger for the characters to *recognize* that they are becoming old, which is necessary as a structural device in a narrative that portrays aged protagonists. Hence, the characters' bodies incorporate two functions that are, interestingly, both highly self-referential (though at different levels), which mirrors the way the *Künstlerroman* uses the body of its protagonist to point to the works' own "status as an artifact," as Waugh would phrase it in her often-quoted def-

inition of metafiction (2), and thus to come to terms with its own textuality. In late-style narratives, in turn, the body functions as the site – the material place – where identity is discussed and defined. The ageing body is therefore not dissolved in the text, as in the *Künstlerroman*; rather, it intrudes upon the textual construct again and again and threatens its very basis, which is its fictionality. This mirrors the fact that the decline of the physical faculties also shakes the foundations of the protagonists' general sense of identity – not only because it is a reminder of approaching death, but also because the elderly have to abandon their customary lifestyle and reshape their life according to the limits and demands of their bodies. Felton therefore rightly fears that their increasing frailty could force them to give up their home: "It required the pair of them in good health to maintain their Heron Bay house and the modest Baltimore condo that they'd bought as a city retreat when they'd retired (Barth, *The Development* 46). Such a re-definition of their identity is not feasible for the Feltons. Their writing activity, which centers on their death rather than on their ageing processes, is therefore a strategy of avoidance aimed at excluding old age rather than integrating it into their life narratives.

The Feltons' misguided writing strategy, through which they avoid confronting old age directly, has its origin in their former jobs, and it thereby foreshadows one of the reasons why Newett's – the artist's – approach is more successful. Since the Feltons were both involved in administration during their working lives – "he had an "upper-midlevel-management post," and Susan an "office-administration job" (27) – they are used to carefully organizing every step of their lives – a method that becomes unsuitable as old age with its unpredictability sets in. Hence, they are forced to constantly revise and rewrite their last will and testament to keep track of how their possessions will be divided after their deaths, since, in the meantime, some of their beneficiaries have died and public institutions have ceased to exist. However, although the Feltons' careful planning of what will happen after their deaths seems successful in bridging their old age, it complicates, in fact, the more immediate problems at hand. Since their detailed, periodically updated wills must consider at least a rough estimate of when they will die, they are additionally confronted with the issue of life expectancy. Felton's personalized Web search on life expectancy predicts that he will die in a "(very!) short time, fourteen to go, barring accident, although it could turn out to be more or fewer" (31, original italics). Although death itself is no threat to him, the unpredictability of the time lapse ("more or fewer") fuels his fear of losing control over the future, and he must ask himself: "How many more so-agreeably-routine days and evenings remained to them before … what?" (46). This looming 'what' – old age affected by physical

decline and illness – is unthinkable and unspeakable for Felton, and it is precisely this loss of control over old age that the Feltons are trying to replace with the control over their deaths.

In contrast to the uncertainty involved in getting old, controlling and planning their deaths thus seems preferable for the Feltons, as the necessary arrangements have already been made: their wills have been neatly written and recently updated. Felton's former wish that "they could just push a button and make themselves and their abundant possessions simply disappear – *poof!* – the latter transformed into equitably distributed checks in the mail to their heirs, with love …" (29, original italics) eventually comes true as they commit suicide. Utterly distraught at the prospects of old age, the couple did turn to writing, but instead of integrating the symptoms of old age into their life narrative, they directly wrote their deaths. That their real deaths are the inevitable consequence of their writing seems quite cynical but in fact affirms Barth's textual logic that fiction precedes reality rather than experience preceding writing – even more so in the stories that follow after "Toga Party." In addition to a consistent cause-effect relationship between writing and reality, the narrative provides a strong feeling of closure through the death of the protagonists. Hence, as is typical in old-age narratives, closure and suicide are used to counteract the threat of loss of control.

In contrast to Richard Felton, whose writing strategy leads directly to his death, Tim Manning, protagonist and narrator of "Peeping Tom" and "Assisted Living," finds, at first sight, a more successful approach to old age because he adopts a more flexible writing strategy. In the first story, "Peeping Tom," Manning and his wife Margaret are still in relatively good health. However, physical decline has already been announced by Manning's memory problems, which will eventually be diagnosed as Alzheimer's disease, and by his wife's arthritis and macular degeneration (2). In view of their approaching old age, Manning, a former history teacher, decides "to set down, for whomever, before [his] memory goes kaput altogether, some account of [their] little community" (7). It is important to notice that his account portrays himself and his wife in their fifties or sixties, that is, before they are confronted with any major signs of decline. Only based on the stable definition of happy middle age will he be able to construct his new identity as an old man.

Although Manning's initial writing strategy results from his former job just like Richard Felton's does, he will be forced to change and adapt his method when his Alzheimer's disease takes over in the second story he narrates. Being a historian, Manning emphasizes the fact that he will faithfully and truthfully record what happened in their neighborhood. He insists that he is no story-teller,

but "a history-teller" (7) and he calls himself a "self-appointed chronicler" (22), stating that the truthfulness of his portrait is essential because he is used to adhering to the facts of history. He even reveals the shameful secret that he was "simultaneously stirred and shamed by the unexpungeable image of [his neighbour's] naked wife" when he made love to his own wife (21). This obsession with truth constitutes Manning's reality-based approach at establishing his identity in old age (while simultaneously foreshadowing and contrasting George Newett's way of dealing with his life-facts, especially those related to sexuality). In Manning's case, establishing a continuity in his life narrative, especially with regard to the crossing of the borderline between middle age and old age, is particularly important: once his memory "goes kaput altogether" (7), he will no longer be able to define himself through his profession. Hence, he depends on a suitable writing strategy to deal with the illness that threatens his identity. Manning's written 'memoir,' although it does not yet address the problem of his old age, is therefore aimed at stabilizing the writer's past, middle-aged identity.

The reason why Manning must construct a stable identity as a middle-ager in "Peeping Tom" becomes evident in the first few sentences of his second story, "Assisted Living," when he strongly bases his self-presentation on quoted passages (in italics) from his first story:

> Like any normal person, Tim Manning (speaking) used to think and speak of himself as "I," or "me." *Don't ask me*, the old ex-history teacher would start off one of his "His-Stories" by typing on his computer, *who I think is reading or hearing this* – and then on he'd ramble about his and Margie's Oyster Cove community in Heron Bay Estates, and the interesting season when they and their neighbourhood were bedeviled (or at least had reason to believe they were) by a Peeping Tom. Stuff like that. *I grabbed the big flashlight from atop the fridge*, he would write, *told Margie to call Security, and stepped out back to check*. Or *"I do sort of miss those days," Margie said to me one evening a few years later …*
> That sort of thing.
> But that was Back Then[.] (130, original italics)

His commentary that "Back Then," he could use the first-person pronoun to refer to himself "[l]ike any *normal* person" (130, italics added) powerfully illustrates that he considers his middle age to have been the 'normal' stage of his life, as opposed to old age, which diverges sharply from this norm. The crucial difference arises from the lack of truth-value, which results from his gradually advancing Alzheimer's disease, which deprives him of his capacity to write down any precise memories. As a consequence, old age must be written as a fictional story rather than a true account, and Manning thus realizes that he must *invent*

his old age. The continuity between his former, reality-based approach and his new method is established through the mere name of his new writing strategy, which is to compose a "His-Story" (131) – a merger between history and story, which involves a fictional third-person narrator.

Locating the narrator outside Manning's "I" has become necessary because Manning's "His-Story" of old age is further complicated by the fact that he has lost his wife Margaret, who used to be his tower of strength in the years before her death. Their medical circumstances had led to a symbiotic relationship between Manning's body and his wife's mind, which virtually transformed the two people into one physical person, as both gave up on one part of their body and fully depended on each other's assistance, up to the point that Manning was virtually unable to live without "Indispensable Margie – his 'better two-thirds,' [as] he used to call her" (131). Hence, 'assisted living,' for Manning, had come to mean this relationship of mutual dependence. Since the age-related decline of their bodies affected different parts in each of them – Tim suffers from mental problems only, whereas Margaret was physically weak but still in full control of her mind – the couple complemented each other perfectly:

> In more recent years, as her body and his mind faltered, he more and more assisted her with physical matters – her late-onset diabetes, near crippling arthritis and various other -itisies […] – and ever more depended on *her* assistance in the memory and attention departments as his Senior Moments increased in frequency and duration. (132, original italics)

Due to this symbiotic relationship between the husband's body and the wife's mind, Manning based his identity as an old man strongly on his wife Margaret. Yet, this new self-image suggested that Manning inhabited a body without a mind, or, that he had placed his mind outside his body in his wife, and after her death, he has to construct a new place or entity that can inherit Margaret's role and function. For this purpose, he creates a second self and calls it "Tim Manning," or "T.M.": "In a way, he supposes, 'T.M.' is replacing (as best as he can't) irreplaceable Margie as Tim Manning's living-assistant" (131). His former self, the "I" of his first story, included body and mind, as he was then still able to make use of his memory. Now, in the second story, his faltering mind is transferred to this former, healthy "T.M.," a third person-narrator who is identical with Manning's former self, but writes about his present self. This is the reason why he had to establish such a strong and stable image of himself as a middle-ager in the story "Peeping Tom." This memory-image now becomes old Manning's support and assistance, as he is finally and completely "*left to him-*

self, making this minimal most of his hapless self-helplessness by chewing on language like a cow its cud" (140, original italics).

To tell one's life-narrative through a narrator that is an image of one's former self, however, challenges and inverts the very premises of autobiography. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose, the narrator of the autobiographical text consists of a "narrating I" (which in fiction would be the first-person narrator) and a "narrated I," which coincides with the protagonist (72–75).[12] Hence, autobiographical narratives presuppose a temporal distance between "narrating I" and "narrated I," as the former tells about the latter in the past tense. In addition to this temporal distance, the "narrating I" also distances itself from the "narrated I" by way of its higher level of knowledge and maturity. That the "narrating I" knows how the story of the "narrated I" will end results in the ironic structure inherent in every autobiographical narrative. The use of his former self by Tim Manning to control his present, weak "narrated I" in the story "Assisted Living" illustrates this need for a narrator that is superior to the character. Yet, due to its paradoxical temporal set-up, his narrative construct is doomed to fail. Although the former, stable self-image is located outside Tim Manning's mind (in the story "Peeping Tom") and therefore safe from being corrupted by his memory problems, it cannot possibly *remember* what will happen to Tim Manning *in the future*. The fact that the stable, middle-aged Tim Manning of the first story is constructed upon the premise of absolute truthfulness and adherence to reality will therefore not prevent him from becoming fictionalized when the old Tim Manning employs him. Indeed, the paradoxical interdependence of the two stories exposes any autobiographical narrative as fictional and therefore untruthful: not only is the "narrated I" retrospectively constructed and therefore affected by the inaccuracy of memory, but the superior "narrative I" is also unreliable because it falsely presents its own narrative as truthful. In this regard, autobiography behaves just like any fictional first-person narrative with an unreliable narrator. Autobiography – the borderline discourse between reality and fiction – thus exposes the structures and processes inherent in narrative fiction in general.

For the illness-struck Tim Manning, a further problem arises: although he can avoid exposing his flawed memory by using a fictional third-person narrator, he still holds the position of the author of his autobiographical story. In other words, even if he uses his former self as a narrator, this demands the present

12 This is a somewhat reduced rendering of Smith and Watson's model, but sufficient for the current purpose. A detailed discussion of autobiography, including the theory proposed by Smith and Watson, will follow in Chapter 5 in connection with Joan Didion's novels *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Blue Nights*.

self's agency – an agency that has become highly unreliable through Manning's Alzheimer's disease. More than once, therefore, narrator T.M. – the "same guy who'll get on with telling this story if he can recollect what the hell it is" (132) – digresses, forgets what he has been writing about, or breaks up abruptly. The story, whose aim was to portray the Mannings' life in their new home, becomes a patchwork of old memories, present worries, and pieces of narration of their recent past, such as their move to the assisted-living establishment and Margaret's death – all of it characterized by an increasing tone of hopelessness and exasperation. In other words, the story "Assisted Living" becomes the mirror image of Tim Manning as an old man. In the end, a dispirited Manning wishes they had done as the Feltons did as long as they still could: "Best of all […] would've been to take matters into their own hands like […] Dick and Susan Felton" (139–140). After several years of struggling to adapt and readapt to old age through writing, Manning eventually gives up. Alone, increasingly confused, and entirely dependent on his own writing now, he only sees one possibility of ending his life in a dignified way before his mental disease takes over completely: just as he has formerly made use of writing to define his life, he now makes use of it to define his death:

> Assisted Living? Been there, done that.
> So?
> Well. Somewhere on this QWERTYUIOP keyboard – maybe up among all those *F1-F12, pg up/pg dn, num lock/clear* buttons? – there ought to be one for Assisted Dying …
> Like, hey, one of these, maybe: *<home? end>?*
> *help*
> Worth a try:
> *enter* (140, original italics)

The story virtually takes over the old man's identity and, after this ending, Manning does not make any appearance in the rest of the volume. Again, Barth's textual logic suggests that reality is determined by language, as Manning has successfully shaped and controlled both his life and his death through his writing.

Since Manning and his narrative merge at the end, the two stories "Peeping Tom" and "Assisted Living" suggest that autobiographical narratives, despite their inherently fictional nature, do express some truth about their authors, yet this proposal complicates the division between author and text. As Smith and Watson state,

> [w]e like to think of human beings as agents of or actors in their own lives rather than passive subjects of social structures or unconscious transmitters of cultural scripts and models of identity. Consequently, we tend to read autobiographical narratives as acts and thus proofs of human agency. They are at once sites of agentic narration where people control the interpretation of their lives and stories, telling of individual destinies and expressing 'true' selves. (54)

If one presumes that authors are, indeed, the agents of their writing, autobiographical texts are a 'true' representation of their authors. Yet, the connections between author and work are not to be located in the character of the "narrated I" but in the structure of the narrative, and most especially in the ironic distance between "narrating I" and "narrated I." However, if one extends this premise to fictional narratives, they equally become the sites of agency of their authors and express their makers' "'true' selves" (54). Indeed, the paradox of autobiography is that, in its assessment, it seems to erase itself as a category, as James Olney recognizes:

> In talking about autobiography, one always feels that there is a great and present danger that the subject will slip away altogether, that it will vanish into thinnest air, leaving behind the perception that there is no such creature as autobiography [or, on the contrary,] that all writing that aspires to be literature is autobiography and nothing else. ("Autobiography" 4)

Nevertheless, it is precisely through the study of the elusiveness of autobiography that one arrives at insights concerning the nature of language, or what Robert Folkenflik calls the "great problematics" of the "fictional encoding of the factual" (Introduction 15). After all, as Folkenflik states, "[i]f autobiography were merely a variety of first-person narration, it neither would receive the popular attention it does, nor would it be as interesting a form for critics" (15). This is especially true for narratives that combine autobiography with old age. Both are borderline discourses that take some pressing issues to their limits.

It is therefore not a coincidence that the narratives Tim Manning constructs in old age are autobiographical, nor is the turn to autobiography that one can observe in many aged authors' writing. As old age sets in with its vulnerability, illness and pain, the body makes itself felt as an almost independent, material existence outside language, and it has to be re-integrated and re-narrativized through writing. Autobiography, in raising questions about the nature of the relationship between reality and language, is the discourse that takes one closest to understanding one's own material existence – so close that fact and fiction, the body and the narrative that represents it, seem to merge as in the story "Assisted Living." The conflicting question as to whether the body really

precedes the story, or whether the story determines the body, is what leads Tim Manning as a narrator to a theoretical paradox that can only be solved with his death. At the moment in which Manning intends to become one with his story, his narrative construct must break down. Much like Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, in which the fusion of Ambrose's body with the text (i. e. his disappearance in the funhouse) does not propose a satisfactory solution to the problem of representation, the Manning stories in *The Development* – and also "Toga Party" – suggest that in old-age stories, narrative closure can only be achieved through death. At the same time, the theoretical discussion in the guise of fiction that these stories offer effectively prepares the ground for the main narrator George Newett's performance.

3.5 Authorial Power Games: Controlling and Constructing Old Age

George Newett is a curious case, indeed. Why does John Barth make up a character that is so closely shaped after himself, only to undermine these similarities almost immediately? Any reader who knows some of the author's biographical details will immediately establish a connection between Barth and Newett: both are retired professors of creative writing programs, both write and publish narrative fiction, both quote the same theorists, and, for both, the apparent futility of creative writing programs at college level is one of their pet subjects. Yet, as soon as these biographical parallels are established, they must be questioned by the most obvious incompatibility between author and protagonist: whereas the former is a successful author and critic, the latter is presented as a "failed-old-fart writer" (*The Development* 42). Hence, although they share many biographical details, Barth is clearly superior to his character, and it is precisely this hierarchical structure that lies at the heart of *The Development*, both with regard to the relationship between Barth and his alter ego Newett, and the connection the text draws between Newett and the two other elderly writers, Richard Felton and Tim Manning. Barth, as will be suggested here, uses a surrogate that is so clearly inferior to himself in order to entertain an illusion of control in old age. As he projects his image onto a controllable entity – the protagonist and narrator George Newett – he is able to construct old age as a narrative while he manages to elude autobiographical responsibility through the intricate power structure inherent in the short story cycle. In *The Development*'s complex narrative set-up, Newett functions as a merger of Barth's autobiographical alter ego, a purely fictional character, a narrator, and the author of his own life-story. Moreover,

from the initial introduction of Newett's figure as a minor character towards the final revelation that he is actually the creative mind behind the whole book, one can observe a development that reverses the structure inherent in Barth's *Künstlerroman*: whereas the earlier text stages the abstraction of the fictional story from the life of the artist – Ambrose disappears in the middle of the volume and continues only in the abstracted form of several author- and narrator-figures – in *The Development*, Newett turns into the center of attraction as the stories unfold, and he is clearly distinguished from other writer figures. This structural set-up produces *mise-en-abîme*, and the hierarchal order of the artist-figures eventually extends to John Barth himself.

George Newett's superiority with regard to the other elderly characters Felton and Manning arises partly from the fact that, as a professional writer, Newett can successfully shape his identity as an old man through language, and he is thus the only true artist. In contrast to Felton and Manning, moreover, he 'survives' his attempts at dealing with old age in his writing. Hence, his great effort to master the methods of literary production and adapt them to old age, that is, his attempt at a late style, eventually proves successful. When Newett appears for the first time as a minor character in the second story of the volume, he is immediately identified as an artist: at the toga party, Newett's Latin password of access is – significantly – *ars longa*.[13] Newett has published "the occasional short story […] [in] little magazines that we ourselves rarely glance at" but his chances of becoming a 'capital W-Writer' are, at his age, remote. Yet, he realizes that "many novelists don't hit their stride until middle age [o]r later," (79) so he still dreams that "George Newett would be remembered as a once-conventional and scarcely noticed writer who, in his Late Period, produced the refreshingly original works that belatedly made his name" (89).

This clear reference to the notion of late style, interestingly, reveals the same two functions that the narration of physical decline and illness has in old-age narratives. In the same way as the listing of illnesses triggers the aged protagonists' awareness that the last stage of their lives has begun, the explicitly uttered expectation that old age must influence the author's style is needed here as a premise for the aged writer to reconsider and modify his writing in old age. At the same time – much like the focus on the ageing body, which labels a story

13 The famous Latin saying *ars longa vita brevis* originally stems from the Greek architect and physician Hippocrates and was later taken up by Socrates. In its original meaning, *ars* refers to medical science or general craft rather than to art (Bartels 179–180). However, over the centuries, the meaning of the proverb as highlighting the discrepancy between the ephemeral human existence and the eternity of art has been firmly established.

as preoccupied with old age – the reference to late style identifies the narrative as a self-reflexive work of art that investigates the influence of life circumstances on artistic production. Barth thus reveals that he is acutely aware of late-style theories and he positions *The Development* within these discourses, which points to the influence of criticism and theory on a writer's production (cf. Chapter 2). Of course, one could object that the influence of a faltering body on the mind's imagination, and therefore on its creative production, is a given and should therefore also be apparent in earlier literature. Indeed, traces of late style are regularly identified in earlier works, for instance Shakespeare's last plays (cf. McMullan). However, as the great majority of current late-style critics acknowledge, these are matters of reception (cf. e. g. Hutcheon and Hutcheon, "Historicizing"; McMullan and Smiles, Introduction). Texts that were written before the twentieth century do not foreground their own lateness in the same, often explicit, way as the twentieth- and twenty-first-century narratives discussed in this study.

When Barth has his alter ego Newett venture into a different kind of artistic expression, therefore, it is neither a coincidence, nor does the structural irony inherent in the Newett-character undermine the validity of his enterprise. On the contrary, his great effort to master the methods of literary production and adapt them to old age proves successful, which in turn validates Barth's decision to display his late style so explicitly. Indeed, one can gauge Newett's success by observing his advancement from a minor character in "Toga Party" to a narrator in the stories "Teardown" and "The Bard Award" and, finally, to his assuming the role of the creative mind and organizing agent behind the whole volume in the penultimate story, "The End." Newett there suggests that he may have invented the whole literary universe of the gated community with its aged characters, and that it has become quite real to him: "Sometimes I almost get to thinking that the place is real, or used to be; even that *I* am, or once was" (153, original italics). In contrast to Felton and Manning, who are confined to their narrative universe and to the principles of narrative closure (i. e. they have to die after one or two stories), Newett is allowed a career in the literary universe and finally earns a promotion to 'Author,' as the text ends:

> – [Good] By[e] Georg I. Newett
> (167, original square brackets)

As the text identifies him as the author ("By Georg I. Newett"), Newett transcends the borders of the fictional universe. This would suggest that the narrative, rather than establishing a hierarchical relationship between the author and his work, affirms their mutual dependence. Barth would not be Barth, however,

if he allowed for such a clear interpretation of the ending, and, in extension, of the short story cycle as a whole. Through the addition of the square brackets that turn 'by' into 'goodbye,' Newett becomes the object of somebody else's farewell. Hence, there is a further agent/author in charge. Newett remains Barth's puppet, which the master can use as he pleases and will put down here, only to take it up again in his next novel, *Every Third Thought* (2011).[14] This almost obsessive blurring of the borderlines between character, narrator, and implied or real author – up to the very end – clearly contests the set-up of *Lost in the Funhouse*, in which Ambrose's disappearance in the funhouse suggests a linear process towards abstracting the story's content from its (fictional) author's life. Yet, it also suggests that abstraction from reality – pure fiction – becomes increasingly difficult in old age. It is therefore no coincidence that many aged authors' works show a tendency to autobiographical writing.

It is this turn to autobiography that is simultaneously staged and questioned in *The Development*, and its centerpiece, "The Bard Award," shows most clearly what is at stake when fiction begins to incorporate autobiographical features. In "The Bard Award," narrator Newett engages in an intriguing relationship with his ex-student, the attractive 18-year-old Cassandra Klause, as they decide to collaborate in a writing project. As a result of this entanglement, Newett's narration increasingly gets out of control. The alternation of fictional elements, autobiographical details and metafictional comments add up to an overall impression of confusion. Right before "The Bard Award," in the fictional story "Teardown," Newett still presents himself as the typical omniscient author, who is in control of the text, as he light-heartedly decides to end the story by "pull[ing] its narrative plug before somebody gets hurt" (72).[15] When Newett

14 The fact that Barth's latest novel, *Every Third Thought*, features George I. Newett again is evidence of the decisive role this character plays in Barth's way of giving shape to ideas of old age, late style, autobiography, and, more generally, representation through writing. The decision to limit the present discussion of Newett to *The Development* and to exclude *Every Third Thought* was taken due to this chapter's focus on old age as intruding upon previously fixed notions of representation. A more extensive analysis of Newett's development and function as Barth's alter ego in both books would certainly render interesting results, however. As suggested in Chapter 4 with regard to Karen Blixen's short stories "The Dreamers" and "Echoes," taking up and modifying a character in a later work can in itself be considered a feature of late style, since this kind of hypertextuality, i.e. the ensuing dynamics between the two texts, defies any kind of closure.

15 Towards the end of "Teardown," Newett exposes himself as the narrator of the story and simultaneously reveals that the characters and events are fictional: "You see how it is with us storytellers […] perhaps especially the Old Fart variety, whereof Yours Truly is a member of some standing. Our problem, see, is that we invent people like the

shifts to autobiographical writing in "The Bard Award," in contrast, his confident narrative attitude begins to crumble; he loses himself in an entangled, metafictional structure and is unable to keep his text within the most basic "rules of Story" (71), as he must realize towards the end: "How to wrap up a longish story that has no proper plot-development anyhow?" (93). The fact that Newett is no longer able to simply "pull the plug" and produce narrative closure shows that much more is at stake than the alleged responsibility towards his invented characters in "Teardown" (71). Indeed, it is precisely Newett's inability to properly finish his story that complicates and complements the theory of autobiography that was established in the two Manning-stories before: in autobiography, whose basic motivation is the need to narrativize and understand one's memories and arrive at a stable image of oneself, paradoxically, narrative structure and closure become problematic because they threaten to convert the self into dead story matter. Whereas Manning, a fictional narrator, ends up *literally dead* at the point where his "narrating I" and "narrated I" merge, Newett cannot die because he is John Barth's alter ego and carries strong autobiographical traits. Moreover, the resistance to closure that permeates "The Bard Award," in stark contrast to the earlier stories in the volume, confirms that it is through Newett that Barth keeps exploring and testing new writing strategies. Hence, Newett is the true protagonist of Barth's late-style narrative.

Further evidence that Newett is at the center of Barth's effort to establish a new, old-age-compatible theory of creativity, and that "The Bard Award" is the narrative space where this is most effectively exercised, can be found in the way this story takes over and redefines elements from the genre of the *Künstlerroman*, especially with regard to the function sexuality fulfills. In the course of the writing collaboration between Newett and his young ex-student, the newly-retired professor entertains sexual fantasies that enormously boost his inspiration as a writer, up to the point that Newett considers having sex with his young muse, as the quality of his writing seems to depend exclusively on his access to Cassandra's female body:

> Should FOF Newett now commit his maiden adultery, so to speak, by humping one of his not-quite-ex students – at her initiative, to be sure, but still … – thereby blighting both his long happy marriage and his academic retirement, disgusting his colleagues and grown-up children, but perhaps reactivating (for what they're worth) his so-long-quiescent creative energies? (92)

Barneses, do our best to make them reasonably believable and even simpatico, follow the rules of Story by putting them in a high-stakes situation […]" (71).

The nature of Newett's strong temptation is not exclusively sexual, as the above quote shows, but he secretly hopes to become a better writer by "humping" young Cassandra because he has noticed that the contact with the student "showed signs of stirring [his] own muse from her extended hibernation" (88). Noticeably, his motivation as a writer comes to a peak right after he has seen Cassandra's "unpantied bare white etc." (80), which she had adorned with literary phrases. Contrary to the "pages' bare white backside" of a former, untalented student's work (79–80), Cassandra's "lettered derrière" (80) effectively stimulates Newett's creative imagination. During their subsequent writing collaboration, he feels so inspired by Cassandra's remarks on his stories that he even "dared hope to return to [his] long-abandoned second novel and CPR it back to life" (90). The narrative thus establishes a strong connection between youth and poetic inspiration, on the one hand, and old age and creative decline, on the other, since Newett believes that only the sexual contact with the youthful Cassandra can make his creative energies return.

The fact that elderly artists in fictional narratives rely on sexual experiences with much younger women for their creative productivity is not extraordinary, yet it deserves some closer attention, especially with regard to the function sexuality performs as a structural device in the *Künstlerroman* and in view of the different tasks the young and old artist-protagonists are confronted with in their respective quests. The old artist-protagonist's main task is not to decide in favor of art (he has done so long ago), but to adapt to his gradually changing body. The threat posed by physical decline is closely related to pain and death, both of which draw the artist's attention to his own materiality, as opposed to the immateriality of art. In other words, the artist is painfully reminded of the finality of his existence and thus of his closeness to life rather than art. As Heiner Bus affirms, "[a]rt can create the illusion of evading progression and finality, of being the eternal survivor who lives to tell the tale" (186). It is certainly in this sense that one could see George Newett's hope that his tale "may outlast its author" and become part of "Papa T's [time's] endless, ever-growing library" (167), which he expresses on the last page of *The Development*.

Yet, portraying old age in textual form becomes gradually more difficult as bodily decline progresses, and such traditional notions of the function of literature are challenged. The auspicious eternity of the text may lose a great deal of importance in view of the real threat of approaching death. In other words, in old age, the body fights back. For, as Elisabeth Bronfen rightly points out, "the limit of representation is at stake […] once the cultured subject is thrown back onto the real materiality of its corporeal existence – notably in moments of traumatic pain or extreme ecstasy […]" (110). Illness and pain, in particular,

challenge representation through language, as Elaine Scarry explains: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). As a result of the physical changes the ageing body undergoes, then, the late-style narrative cannot stage the neat replacement of the body by the text (as the *Künstlerroman* arguably does); rather, the text turns into a site of never-ending negotiations between the natural and the cultural (textual) body. In Edward Said's words, in old age the conflict is between the "realm of nature," on the one hand, which consists of "[t]he body, its health, its care, composition, functioning, and flourishing, its illnesses and demise," and "secular human history," on the other, that is, "what we understand of that nature, […] how we see and live it in our consciousness" (3). For precisely these reasons, Newett's identity as a character, narrator, or author must remain blurred, whereas Ambrose's destiny is clearly defined, and his disappearance in the funhouse of the text is final. In this critical approach to questions of representation, the late-style narrative comes to resemble what Tanner observes to be "analytical efforts [which] converge in the concrete, mortal human body, without forgetting that the corporeal existence of human beings will never be independent of the empire of signs" (1279).

In this creative battlefield, where the ageing artist-protagonist is continuously confronted with the finality of his existence, increasing sexual activity is, apparently, an effective method for the protagonist to affirm life and persuade himself that he can still dispose of sufficient creative energy. Why must the woman be so much younger, however? In the case of Newett, sexual intercourse with his wife Amanda does not seem to have the same effect of "reactivating […] his so-long-quiescent creative energies" (91) as the near-sexual contact with young Cassandra does. Yet, with Cassandra, sexual contact never occurs, and it is this reluctance of Newett's to fully engage with Cassandra that draws back on the *Künstlerroman*. As stated above, in the late-style narrative, the archetype of the young artist-to-be of the *Künstlerroman* clashes with critical ideas of stylistic lateness. Sexuality (i. e. sexual initiation) in the *Künstlerroman* has such a pivotal function because it turns the young protagonist into an artist, as it unites the contact with the muse with the prospect of procreation, and hence, productivity. The late-style narrative adopts this function, but, in this deeply symbolic (and strongly gendered – if not blatantly sexist) world, an elderly woman will not do because she is no longer fertile and has thus lost her function as a symbol of productivity. Young Cassandra boosts Newett's inspiration precisely because she embodies the possibility of reproduction, which seems to be a *sine qua non* for the elderly writer. One can take John Barth's declaration in

an interview in 2001 as an affirmation of this interpretation: upon being asked about the next novel he might write, Barth replied: "One never knows, especially at the age of 70, which pause between projects will turn out to be the muse's menopause" ("Blair Mahoney Interviews John Barth" 3). Thus, in Barth's textual logic, an elderly muse past her menopause does not provide the necessary inspiration for the artist, as she does not bear the potential of reproduction.[16] For this reason, Newett needs Cassandra despite his happy marriage with his wife. The fact that he eventually turns down Cassandra's sexual offer is nothing less than a re-staging of the same crossroad in the *Künstlerroman*: the aged artist, who has been freshly assured of his procreative power, *again* takes the traditional decision to abandon the penis in favor of the pen.

Many male late-style narratives include at least one sexual encounter of the artist with a much younger woman.[17] However, its symbolic function is hardly ever investigated. Bus, for instance, in his study on ageing in recent Jewish-American literature, finds that many artist-figures rely on "much younger female characters" for boosting their creativity, and that these women, "after being exploited, are more or less discarded" (185), but he ascribes this to "the process of male denial of the brutal facts of human existence" (185). In Bus' view, the sexual experiences with these younger women mainly serve the purpose of generating experience, whose memory can then be "transformed into art by the urge to create, [which] serves as life saver of ageing characters, as medication against surrender to old age, against the horror vacui, inertia [and] eventual stasis" (186). Although one can certainly agree with Bus' analysis, one should not ignore how heavily these narratives rely on the genre conventions of the *Künstlerroman*. Their efforts to establish a creative theory that is compatible with the – often physical – symptoms of old age result in a deeply symbolic narrative, in which the functions of certain structural items from the *Künstlerroman*, such as the sexual contact with a muse, are simultaneously adopted and adapted.

Yet, the need for a sexual encounter with a young woman, even if it serves mainly symbolic and structural functions, may pose a problem for late-style narratives because of their impulse towards autobiography, which involves endowing the artist-protagonist with some of the life circumstances and charac-

16 The problem of having only an elderly partner for sex is already foreshadowed in the story "Teardown," where Joe Barnes, not feeling sexually satisfied with a woman who is going through her menopause, pictures the body of his young PA during intercourse with his wife (*The Development* 68–69).

17 See, for instance, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Joseph Heller's *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word*, and Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* and *The Humbling*.

teristics of his author. Although Philippe Lejeune, in *On Autobiography*, contends that narratives in which the name of the protagonist differs from that of the author are not proper autobiographies; they can be categorized as *autobiographical novels*, which he defines as follows:

> [A]utobiographical novels [are] fictional texts in which the reader has reason to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and *protagonist*, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not to affirm it. […]. Unlike autobiography, it involves *degrees*. The "resemblance" assumed can be anything from a fuzzy "family likeness" between the protagonist and the author, to the quasi-transparency that makes us say that he is the "spitting image." (13, original italics)

This autobiographical mode prevents authors from entering a "narrative pact" with their readership, which would either bind them to absolute truthfulness, or else characterize their narrative as a lie (cf. Lejeune 17). Moreover, the variable "degree of likeness" that Lejeune assigns to autobiographical novels also leaves the author with a greater freedom; it does *not*, however, prevent readers from constructing certain authorial intentions behind a passage or a motive in such a text. Especially in late-style narratives, readers are keen to establish connections between the authors and their stories because it caters to their need for a strong authorial figure who is in control of his or her artistic product (cf. Chapter 2). Therefore, if an author creates a sexual adventure for his literary alter ego, the readers will most probably relate this to his own fantasies and desires. Whereas sexuality is much less problematic in the *Künstlerroman* because it is indispensable for a coming-of-age story, and because youth is commonly associated with sexual activity, in old age, sexuality is still a taboo: it is thought to be unseemly, even shocking. The image of the 'dirty old man' readily arises, especially when the woman is so much younger. The device of structural irony can diminish this problem to a certain extent, as one can see in *The Development*: Barth constructs his alter ego Newett as clearly less knowledgeable and successful than himself. His protagonist is not only a 'dirty old man' but also a "failed-old-fart writer" (42), which increases the distance between Barth and Newett and leaves Barth with a greater degree of creative liberty.

Especially in the instances where Newett is most clearly shaped after John Barth – in his former position as a professor for creative writing – the similarity between author and character is simultaneously confirmed and denied. Here, too, the differences serve the function of establishing Newett as inferior to Barth. Newett's concerns as a college professor for creative writing are almost identical

to the ones Barth himself expresses in his *Friday Book*, subtitled *Essays and Other Nonfiction*. Newett's worry that none of his students will ever become a respectable writer (*The Development* 76), for instance, mirrors Barth's words in "Praying for Everybody" (*The Friday Book* 101–105), where the author explains that "the great majority of students in college fiction-writing courses – even the Creative Writing diplomates – never achieve professional publication, for the reason that their work never gets to be good enough to be competitive" (102). Although the similarity of their expositions is striking, their motives differ markedly: author Barth's aim is to encourage teaching creative writing *despite* the fact that so few succeed, for the reason that "many are called, but few are chosen" (103). Being a successful author, Barth does not hesitate to place some faith in his students. Newett, in contrast, uses the moderate success-rate of his students to put his own failed writing career into perspective:

> The circumstance that as of this writing no Stratford alum has managed that not-so-difficult achievement does not prove our pedagogical labors fruitless, at least in our and most of our colleagues' opinion. Our program's graduates are better writers by baccalaureate time than they were at matriculation […]. If they then become law clerks, businesspeople, schoolteachers, or whatever else, rather than capital-W writers – well, so did their profs, and we don't consider *our* careers wasted. Do we? (*The Development* 76, original italics)

Besides functioning as a distancing device between Barth and Newett, the above passage also illustrates how strongly Newett relies on his former profession for the construction of his identity in old age. After his retirement, it is time for Newett to look back and qualify his past as successful or "wasted." His continuing belief that he will turn into the "writer who, in his Late Period, produced the refreshingly original works that belatedly made his name" (89) is an error in judgment that, again, places Newett at a safe, ironic distance from Barth. As a result, readers will infer that the latter has no need for such a young "Cassandra" for creative inspiration. Newett's rather explicit sexual fantasies will therefore not wash back onto Barth himself.

Indeed, Barth is careful to cover his tracks when it comes to autobiographical similarity. Yet, it is precisely this need to cover his tracks that unmasks Barth as most similar to Newett, who also tries to evade authorial responsibility and ascribe his story to others when he states that "for all one knows (or cares) ["The Bard Award"] may be being written by Not-Yet-Failed Fictionist Franklin Lee," Newett's colleague (93). Moreover, the story itself is signed by "'*Hook R. Crook,*'" which seems to be one of Cassandra's imaginative pen names (93). Newett thus blurs the origin of his work just like Barth himself, who uses Newett's name in

the signature at the end of the whole short story cycle. Moreover, in the same way as Barth uses the literary cosmos as a laboratory to test his late-style theories, Newett uses some male aged characters to explore the possibilities of dealing with old age through writing. Dick Felton and Tim Manning, who both die because their writing strategies are misguided, operate as Newett's inferior, experimental alter egos in precisely the same way as Newett functions as Barth's ironic second self. The structural set-up of the short story cycle draws a spiral that will, sooner or later, implicate its author, although the use of structural irony to exert control over Newett – the distance that is necessary to construct a coherent narrative of old age – proves successful to avoid any direct autobiographical connections. Yet, using a near-autobiographical artist-figure as a protagonist opens up a *mise-en-abîme* structure that not only suggests "an endless succession of internal duplications" (Baldick 158), but also extends in the opposite direction. From this point of view, Smith and Watson's claim that "we tend to read autobiographical narratives as acts and thus proofs of human agency" and that these narratives express their authors' "'true' selves" (54) holds true in that we ascribe a work's focus on late style to its aged author's preoccupation with it.

More important than making deductions about the work's author, however, is to find and investigate the sites where the narrative explores old age, and to trace the lines and intersections of the intricate network that constitutes the text's theory of late style. Many of the insights arise only once we realize what a threat old age poses to our human existence, and what role narrative fiction assumes in mediating it. Yet, reducing such a narrative to its author's attempt to come to terms with old age would result in a massive loss of theoretical implications, which are the main gain for literary critics. The way late-style narratives take issues of language, materiality, fiction, and autobiography – to name but the ones discussed in this chapter – to their limits provides these theoretical reflections with an urge that one will rarely find elsewhere. This urge resonates with late-style theories that foreground the artist's "compulsion, to concentrate on the implications – the *meanings* – of lateness" (Painter 6, original italics) and hold that late works celebrate "a particular liminality" in order to position themselves as "borderline activity, a creative response to death, a kind of eschatology" (McMullan 10).

The use of an artist-protagonist, moreover, raises questions with no simple answers: Does the fact that artists are skilled narrators assist them in cushioning the impact of old age? Are they more successful in integrating physical decline, illness and pain into their life narratives? The above discussion of Dick Felton, Tim Manning, and George Newett strongly suggests this, as the former two

characters' writing strategies, which are directly linked to their non-artistic professions, lead to their deaths rather than to successful ageing. Only artist-protagonist Newett, whose adventures in the fictional universe continue in Barth's following work, is permitted to grow older. This happens, however, at the expense of narrative closure, which then undermines the work's function of facilitating a coherent and conclusive narrative of old age. Or, must one realize that the figure of the artist, due to its long tradition and through its confinement to the fixed narrative structure in the *Künstlerroman*, has become so symbolized that it proves unsuitable for any narrative explorations of real life? Are narratives that feature artists as protagonists always already self-reflexive, so that there is no escape out of the vicious circle of self-referentiality? And, if so, is not any narrative affected by similar problems?

What is certain is that in raising these questions, late-style narratives perform an important step towards creating a heightened awareness of the complexity of both old age and narrative. In the chapters to follow, this complexity will be further illuminated and some tentative answers will be offered.

4 Disrupting Closure, Challenging Death: Karen Blixen's Pellegrina Stories

> 'The death of the author' is now the *doxa*, and, like all such forms of knowledge, it forbids itself to raise disturbing questions. Prominent among those interdictions is the implied maxim: 'Thou shalt not read an author's life.' The problem is that an author's life is very often a major literary achievement.
>
> (Regard, "The Ethics of Biographical Reading" 354)

4.1 The Continuation and Revision of Earlier Work

If the search for new ways of creating, which finds its expression in the revision of the artist's style in old age, is to a great extent caused by the decline of the body and the proximity of death (cf. Straus), then Karen Blixen's narratives should be a prime example.[1] Blixen died in 1962 after half a lifetime of bad health and she spent her last years in agonizing pain. As Donald Hannah reports, the composition of Blixen's late works was influenced substantially by her physical condition: "After long spells in hospital and a series of operations, she was often too ill and weak to sit upright, and was forced to lie flat on the floor, and in that position to dictate her later stories to her secretary" (*'Isak Dinesen'* 65). Yet, one does not find the kind of overt commentary on creativity and style that is characteristic of the late writing of so many authors of her time. Hence, at first sight, Blixen seems to resist the trend to draw from her own experience as an elderly woman for her late literary texts. The fact that she does not place herself within

1 In the Anglophone world, Karen Blixen is better known under her pseudonym Isak Dinesen. Her real name, Karen Blixen, is used throughout this chapter because of the implications the choice of a male pseudonym has, which will be elaborated on below. In some secondary sources, from which I quote in this chapter, 'Isak Dinesen' is used instead.

her contemporary stylistic trends is not surprising if one takes into account that most of Blixen's oeuvre is marked by stylistic individualism, which makes it so difficult to categorize her work. As Susan C. Brantly states, "[s]everal attempts have been made to place Dinesen in the context of various literary movements, but as yet, there seems to be little consensus" (*Understanding* 4). Ellen Rees, for instance, ascribes some of Blixen's early stories to late modernism, which she defines (following Tyrus Miller) in terms of its anticipation of "certain elements of the postmodernism that was to follow" and its critique of "the modernist formalism that preceded it" (334). However, Blixen's seemingly Victorian style, enriched with some avant-garde elements, is strangely out of place and time in a Europe dominated by modernism. Indeed, "[s]ome critics think of her as unique with no particular connection to trends in contemporary literature" (Brantly, *Understanding* 4).

Despite this apparent reluctance to follow the dominant literary trends, Blixen's later works did not escape the wave of late style theories that influenced so many aged writers in, and beyond, the second half of the twentieth century. Her stories show clear signs of lateness, although in a less overt manner than some other postmodernist works discussed in this study. Most especially in her collection of short stories *Last Tales*, it becomes evident that the author is deeply concerned with her ageing body, her role as an ageing female writer, and the effect her age could have on her literary production and possibly also on its reception. In this chapter, it will therefore be proposed that Blixen neatly inscribes herself into a tradition of contemporary authors who, in their late works, purposefully discuss the relationship between old age and the production of art.

Last Tales was published in 1957, only a few years before Blixen died, and the title immediately and unambiguously draws attention to the author's impending death by declaring the volume to be her 'last' work.[2] What seems especially interesting are the three section titles within the volume: "Tales from Albondocani," "New Gothic Tales," and "New Winter's Tales." Albondocani refers to an unfinished project that Blixen spoke about frequently in her last years: she envisioned writing a novel consisting of "one hundred, two hundred or as many as 1001 separate, but connected tales" (Brantly, "Karen Blixen" 182). According to Brantly, this novel was to represent the world as "an infinitely complex network of stories generated by an Artist / God" (186). As to the other two section titles, they refer to Blixens's earlier collections of short stories *Seven Gothic Tales*

2 Two other books, *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958) and *Shadows on the Grass* (1960), were published after *Last Tales*, but still in Blixen's lifetime, and some more of her fictional and non-fictional writing was published posthumously.

(1934) and *Winter's Tales* (1942). By evoking her earlier work and simultaneously labeling the stories under these headings as 'new,' Blixen seeks both the continuation of, and a break with, some of her early stories and enacts what Sandro Zanetti views as the most prominent feature of late works: "that the [late] work, understood as continuation, has a recognizable relationship to (an) earlier work(s), to which it keeps referring either in the sense of an extension or by way of establishing a distance" (321).[3] Hence, these new tales are not just an addition to the 1934 and 1942 volumes of short stories, but Blixen here purposefully revises some of the ideas that were conveyed in them. This chapter will thus approach late style as a way of breaking up the closure of previously defined aesthetic concepts in order to affirm life – the artist's life – as an ongoing search for novelty in artistic form.

A tale that emphatically performs this function is "Echoes," which is part of the section "New Gothic Tales." The story tells an episode in the life of Pellegrina Leoni, a former diva who lost her singing voice after being hit by a falling beam when the opera stage caught fire in mid-performance. Yet, in order to appreciate the ways in which "Echoes" provides insights into the phenomenon of late style, one has to start with a much earlier literary text by Blixen, "The Dreamers," for which she first created the character of Pellegrina Leoni. "The Dreamers" was published as an extended short story or novella in the volume *Seven Gothic Tales*, which was Blixen's first collection of literary texts. Blixen started to write seriously quite late, aged 46, after she returned from Africa in 1931. Having lost everything she considered part of her identity, such as her African farm and her lover Denis Fynch Hatton, who had died in a plane crash, she decided to make a new beginning in her homeland, Denmark. "The Dreamers" is reported to be the first story Blixen wrote after leaving her African life behind (cf. Bjørnvig 47; Brantly, *Understanding* 55), and it is certainly no coincidence that the text not only displays autobiographical features but also resembles a female *Künstlerroman*. Through an intricate arrangement of frame tales, the life story of Pellegrina Leoni emerges: the opera singer, after losing her voice, decides to stage her funeral, travel through Europe, and take on several different fictional identities. She declares: "I will not be one person again, […] I will be always many persons from now" ("The Dreamers" 300). She eventually dies in a stormy night

3 My own translation from German. The original sentence reads: "Eine weiterführende Verwendung des Begriffs 'Spätwerk' setzt […] voraus, dass das betreffende Werk, verstanden als Weiterarbeit, in einem erkennbaren Bezug zu einem früheren Werk oder früheren Werken steht, auf das oder die es im Sinne einer Fortsetzung oder im Modus der Abgrenzung bezogen bleibt" (Zanetti 321).

in the Alps after three of her former lovers – who know her under different names – have tracked her down to find out who she really is.

Twenty-three years later, in "Echoes," Blixen resuscitates Pellegrina Leoni to narrate an additional episode in the diva's life that apparently happened during her travelling years. What immediately catches one's attention is that "Echoes" portrays the singer as an old woman, even though Pellegrina, in her literary universe, could not have been more than middle-aged at the time the events in "Echoes" take place. This happens despite the two stories' precise time references, which facilitate a neat reconstruction of the storyline. Even more striking is the fact that Blixen breaks up the closure that was produced through Pellegrina's death in "The Dreamers." According to Hannah, Blixen used to draw a pentagram and explain that "likewise there was nothing to add or subtract to a story when it was entirely finished and the meaning stood out clearly defined" (*'Isak Dinesen'* 144). Hence, the fact that Blixen, contrary to her former ideal, decides to make an addition to Pellegrina's literary life, and that Pellegrina's untimely ageing in "Echoes" distorts the chronology of her timeline, raises some important questions: Why does Blixen resuscitate Pellegrina? How does this challenge and modify the theory of art and female creativity that "The Dreamers" puts forth through its protagonist? And, finally, in what ways can this apparent urge to break up closure, this striving for continuation and revision, be considered an example of lateness?

In order to address these questions, one needs some additional insight into Blixen's life, most especially the relationship between herself and her stories. Curiously – and in contrast to the poststructuralist trends to disregard the author in the appreciation of a literary work – Karen Blixen's narratives have always been fertile ground for speculations concerning the author's intentions, and her life circumstances have continuously informed and shaped the scholarly community's understanding of her narratives to a great extent. As Linda G. Donelson and Marianne Stecher-Hansen state,

> Dinesen worked to establish her own personal myth and her place in world literature. As a result, the relationship between her life and works has been the subject of considerable attention, including many memoirs and biographies. Relatives and friends, scholars and critics have sought to offer the 'true' picture of Karen Blixen's life and persona. […] Studies published in the 1980s and 1990s reveal that the relationship between this author's life and works continues to be the subject of intense critical inquiry and revisionism. (42)

Hence, it was partly Blixen's way of staging herself as an artist that prompted a kind of criticism informed by the writer's biography. According to Hannah,

Blixen "created a personal myth which joined her life and art into a seamless whole, and then embodied this myth in an actual way of life" (*'Isak Dinesen'* 69). The starting point for the myth that was to be her life as a writer was certainly Blixen's adoption of the pseudonym Isak Dinesen in her first serious publication, *Seven Gothic Tales*, of which "The Dreamers" forms part.

Indeed, for many critics, "The Dreamers" functions as a first point of reference when trying to tackle the relationship between Blixen's life and her writing. While Brantly calls "The Dreamers" "the most personal of Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales*" (*Understanding* 55), Lynn R. Wilkinson, among others, sees Pellegrina as her author's alter ego: "[I]t is not difficult to see in Pellegrina Leoni traces of Dinesen's cultivation of her own celebrity: one of her nicknames in Africa had been 'the lioness.' And as a storyteller she assumed many roles while adopting none of them," just like Pellegrina, who takes on several different identities while travelling through Europe (89–90). Moreover, several critics report that Blixen acknowledged that Pellegrina's loss of her voice corresponded to her own loss of her farm in Africa (Donelson and Stecher-Hansen 48; Brantly, *Understanding* 55; 167; and Bjørnvig 46–47). Other scholars associate Blixen's use of different names among her friends and pseudonyms for her writing with Pellegrina's construction of different identities (e. g. Sodowsky and Sodowsky 340). Indeed, just as Pellegrina fashions artificial personas for herself, Blixen seemed to stage both her identity as an author under the male pseudonym Isak Dinesen and her appearance in public in a highly artificial way (Straumann, "A Voice" 247). Yet, the fact that these parallels between Blixen's and Pellegrina's lives are cited by most scholars should not pressure us into an exclusively autobiographical reading of "The Dreamers." Rather, one can use Blixen's own comments and actions to detect the theory of creativity that the author develops early in her career in "The Dreamers" and later partly revokes in old age through "Echoes." On the one hand, the parallels between Blixen's life and work turn "The Dreamers" into a highly personal *Künstlerroman*. However, through Pellegrina's death in "The Dreamers," the narrative also foregrounds the artificiality of art and it thereby distances itself from its author's life. That is, the closure that "The Dreamers" produces through the death of its protagonist remains far from any feeling of closure that the author herself can achieve in her life (if it is not by her own death), which highlights the discrepancy between life and art and runs counter to the largely autobiographical nature of the story.

The difficulty Blixen experienced in trying to balance life and art is aptly summarized by Hannah:

> The more the emphasis is placed upon ordering all the components into an aesthetic design, – 'a total picture,' – the less like life art becomes and the more inhuman, so

> that eventually one is 'not affected deeply.' And the logical end of this, the point where the process reaches its culmination, is death itself. On the other hand, the closer art approximates to the conditions of life, the less perfect, in her [Blixen's] terms, it becomes. The difficulty, the crucial difficulty, confronting her as a writer (and a person) was to find and maintain a precarious point of balance. (*'Isak Dinesen'* 144)

Blixen was thus always preoccupied with the connections between herself and her stories, which are, according to Hannah, "the result of a completely disciplined and completely conscious artistry ("In Memoriam" 588). Nevertheless, she was well aware of the impossibility of ever achieving an overlap between life and representational narrative. This becomes most evident in her autobiographical novel *Out of Africa*, as Hannah observes: "[In *Out of Africa*,] she cannot assimilate her experiences into a theory of art by imposing a finished pattern upon them – inevitably, since her own life's story […] has not yet run its full course" (*'Isak Dinesen'* 144–145). In a sense, "The Dreamers" is also an autobiographical story, but much in the traditional fashion of a *Künstlerroman*, life events are symbolically transformed. This format allows for more artistic liberty than the conventional autobiographical novel, and "The Dreamers" therefore achieves a kind of closure that is not possible in *Out of Africa*: it defines a coherent and conclusive concept of female art and creativity – a concept that Blixen will revoke towards the end of her life in "Echoes."

4.2 Female Art in a Male Disguise: "The Dreamers"

"The Dreamers" has exerted strong attraction on literary critics, arguably due to the narrative's acute sense of structures as signifying units.[4] Bits and pieces of story events are grouped into such units, assigned to one narrative frame or the other, told by one narrator or the other, and eventually knotted into a formidable network of meaning. Any scholarly approach to "The Dreamers" therefore involves, firstly, identifying the narrative frames and their layers and, secondly, establishing connections and hierarchies between them. In which part of the text one shall begin to unravel the strings, and where one shall look for the vital clues are questions that need to be addressed. Shall one start with the narrative frames, the story events, or with the design of the structure itself? Since the aim of this section is to gain insight into Blixen's early theory of female

4 Some passages of this section have formerly been published in the article "No Place for Female Creativity?: Challenging Male Traditions of the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* in Karen Blixen's 'The Dreamers.'"

artistic creativity, this analysis will begin with the female artist-figure herself, Pellegrina Leoni, whose character is primarily revealed through the narration of her actions. Hence, little introspection is provided. Parting from an analysis of her role as a female artist in a patriarchal society, it will be shown that the initially bleak landscape of artistic possibilities for a woman improves its shape considerably once one takes into account further layers of the text, from its narrative frames and its play on generic traditions up to the relevance of its writer's biography. The theory of creativity that emerges from the interplay between story, narration and intertexts affirms the importance of an individual, feminine approach to art. Yet, it also suggests that such an approach is always dependent on its masculine counterpart.

The quest for artistic selfhood in "The Dreamers" is, evidently but not exclusively, enacted by Pellegrina Leoni in her fashioning of several fictional identities, although it is the limitation rather than the liberating potential of creativity that she will ultimately encounter. After losing her famous soprano voice and consequently also her role as a prima donna, Pellegrina decides to travel around Europe and "be always many persons from now" ("The Dreamers" 300). Critics usually interpret Pellegrina's changing of roles as a search for identity (e. g. Straumann, "There are many" 154; Gossman 319). The motif of the voyage is equally important, however, as it draws on the generic tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, or its more specific version, the *Künstlerroman*, in which the hero or the heroine goes through a period of learning away from home, often driven by a longing for "freedom from the past" and "for discovery of [the protagonist's] own individuality" (Seret 2). Both the desire for freedom from the past and the striving for individuality are prime motives for Pellegrina's travelling, and yet, what is more important is that "The Dreamers" thereby enacts a predominantly male literary tradition. From Goethe's Wilhelm Meister to Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, the well-known heroes of the *Künstlerroman* are all young males – with few exceptions, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Virginia Woolf's Lily Briscoe (McWilliams 18), and some protagonists of the New Woman Fiction of the 1890s (Pykett 135). Moreover, these rare woman artists in the *Künstlerroman* seldom have the liberty (or the financial means) to travel for a few years. Rather, they are forced to move inward in order to liberate themselves from the social expectations and restrictions (Abel, Hirsch and Langland, Introduction 8). By leaving her life as a diva behind and wandering through Europe, therefore, Pellegrina also challenges the fixed gender roles, which leave little room for female creativity.

Viewed in the light of these generic traditions, "The Dreamers" thus appears as a unique form of female *Künstlerroman*, in which the protagonist struggles

against historical conventions that restrict independent female artistic activity. Susan Gubar, in her article on Blixen's short story "The Blank Page," shows that Western Christian tradition is "steeped in […] myths of male primacy in theological, artistic, and scientific creativity" (100–101). According to these myths, which include Ovid's story of Pygmalion, the creation of the world according to Genesis, and the Faust stories of Marlowe, Goethe, and Mann, creativity is a primarily masculine quality, and woman is reduced to the object of the male creative act (much in contrast to the fact that every man is created within the womb of a woman). However, "if the creator is a man," Gubar points out, "the creation itself is the female, who, like Pygmalion's ivory girl has no name or identity or voice of her own" (101). Although Donelson and Stecher-Hansen disagree with Gubar's view and hold that "[t]his brand of feminist criticism, which views woman as victim, fails to appreciate the implied sense of feminine superiority in Dinesen's tales" (56), traces of the same myths can be found in "The Dreamers." Pellegrina's act of travelling is an appropriation of the masculine quality of creativity, since it is during her travels that she invents and shapes new fictional identities for herself.

In the context of female creativity, what has been a particularly controversial issue is the question as to whether Pellegrina ever was, became, or stopped being an independent creative artist, that is, whether her change of lives from a diva in Rome to a traveler with many identities signifies the loss of her artistic expression, or rather, her coming of age as an artist. "Traditionally the voice has often been understood as a privileged marker of individual selfhood," as Barbara Straumann explains ("The Effects" 159). Hence, when Pellegrina loses her voice, she also experiences a reduction of her ability to express individual identity. Yet, Pellegrina's role as a singer involves little individuality, as her artistic activity is limited to enacting roles on stage. More specifically, the diva merely uses her voice to reproduce the music that male composers have written for female singers. It is in this context that Gubar's insistence on the tradition of male artists and female objects of art becomes most significant for "The Dreamers," and Pellegrina joins the ranks of such mythical representations, since her identity is fixed to that of the famous soprano. In this light, her transformation into different persons *after* losing her voice can be viewed as more substantial acts of creativity than her former stage performances. In spite of this transformation, Pellegrina cannot entirely liberate herself from the female role, which Gubar describes as "[the male's] passive creation – a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality" (103). Being both an artist – the masculine quality – and a woman – which affirms her as an object – she directs her own creativity towards herself and, in

actively shaping her varying identities, turns herself both into artist and artifact. As the artist, she adopts the clearly masculine activity of travelling around. As the artifact, however, she remains female and stays for some time in the same place and takes on typically feminine roles or identities.

Tellingly, the three major roles Pellegrina fashions for herself – a prostitute, a revolutionary milliner, and a mystic saint – are, according to Susan Aiken, "three of the most overdetermined versions of 'woman' in Western patriarchal culture" (55), and it is in these feminine roles as artifacts that Pellegrina is trapped again by society, or more precisely, by the men whom she encounters (and who are the narrators of Pellegrina's life story). "While Pellegrina keeps reinventing herself so as to avoid being read and appropriated," Straumann states, "each of the three men seeks to reduce her to the particular role which she plays in his story" ("The Effects" 165). Indeed, Lincoln Forsner, the young man who meets Pellegrina in her role as 'Olalla' the prostitute, describes her as a traditional muse when he states: "To this woman I owe it that I have ever understood […] the meaning of such words as tears, heart, longing, stars, which […] poets make use of" ("The Dreamers" 246). The two other men are Friedrich Hohenemser alias Pilot, whom 'Madame Lola' recruits as a revolutionary, and the Swedish Baron Guildenstern, a Don Juan who tries to seduce the saint 'Rosalba.'[5] All three men "want [Pellegrina] to remain the person they had perceived her to be" (Sodowsky and Sodowsky 336) but Pellegrina always manages to escape "[j]ust as each man wants to possess Pellegrina and subordinate her into a role of his choosing" (Brantly, *Understanding* 59). Thus, Pellegrina's travelling functions, on the one hand, as an escape from the restrictions of female role models, but, on the other, it is also associated with artistic creativity because it is during her travels that Pellegrina switches identities. In short, Pellegrina is an artist when she travels and turns into the object of art when she remains in a place.

This alternation of travelling and staying culminates in a dramatic finale when the three men, who have been following her throughout Europe, chase her down in a stormy night in the Swiss Alps. Having told each other their experiences with Olalla, Madame Lola, and Rosalba, respectively, and found out that they had met one and the same woman, they are driven by the desire to discover her true identity. Pellegrina desperately tries to escape over a snowy mountain pass but the three men soon catch up with her. Being confronted with the men's question "Who are you?" ("The Dreamers" 284), Pellegrina throws

5 For more information on Blixen's literary sources for the figures of Olalla and Rosalba, see Rees, "Holy Witch and Wanton Saint: Gothic Precursors for Isak Dinesen's 'The Dreamers.'"

herself into an abyss and dies a few hours later. It is again Gubar's comment on nineteenth- and twentieth-century woman fiction that offers insight into this scene: she states that "the woman writer [feels that] her words are being *expressed from her* rather than *by her*" (111, italics added). Hence, female art threatens to become a reaction to male pressure rather than an independent creative act. Pellegrina can, in the end, only escape this pressure and avoid the question "Who are you?" by staying silent. Literally unable to move on and therefore doomed to be confined to an existence as a mere artifact, she realizes that her only escape route is death and that her creative journey has come to an end.

At this stage, it seems important to point out some of the implications this interpretation of Pellegrina as both artist and artifact has. Straumann views Pellegrina's decision to "transfer her theatrical scenario into everyday life" as "a typically modernist gesture that sets aside the borderline between life and art" in that she directs her art towards her own person ("A Voice" 252). Yet, it must be stressed that Pellegrina, by using herself as an object of art, is denied the transcendence which art traditionally entails, as her art must die with her. Moreover, the apparent "feminine superiority" that Donelson and Stecher-Hansen detect in Blixen's writing (56) here only consists of Pellegrina's liberty to choose suicide over subordination to her male persecutors, which seems a highly unsatisfactory solution for a feminist *Künstlerroman*. While for Blixen herself, a temporary solution to the problems of female authorship was the adoption of a male pseudonym, Pellegrina chooses to die precisely because she finds herself unable to transcend her gender. The time and space granted to female creativity in "The Dreamers" is therefore limited.[6]

Admittedly, Pellegrina does effect some changes in her male followers which amount to a product that outlasts herself: Lincoln Forsner states that Olalla taught him to dream, hence to become a storyteller ("The Dreamers" 243), and

6 Although this slightly diverges from my line of argument, one could also see Pellegrina's decision to choose death over subordination to the three men as a direct consequence of the differences between male and female *Bildungsromane* and *Künstlerromane*. Male protagonists seem to have two alternatives: firstly, they can marry, as in the *Bildungsroman*. Franco Moretti views "[m]arriage as a metaphor for the social contract: this is so true that the classical *Bildungsroman* does not contrast marriage with celibacy, as would after all be logical, but with death (Goethe) or disgrace (Austen). One either marries or, in one way or another, must leave social life […]" (22–23). However, the *Künstlerroman* opens up the option of 'surviving' the decision not to marry, at least for male characters: becoming an artist seems to legitimize a life without disgrace at the margins of society. For female artist-figures, this option is not available. Either they depend on a male character for the production of their art or they must suffer social or physical death.

Pilot reports that he "understood life and the world, and [him]self and God even" (261) while being with Madame Lola. Sodowsky and Sodowsky even hold that the two men mirror Pellegrina in that they "become many people themselves" (338), and Brantly observes: "For each man, Pellegrina supplies a memory he will never forget. She saves Lincoln from the straitjacket of conventional life. She draws Pilot into the world of action, where he can feel important for a time. For the Baron, she is the unassailable fortress to be conquered" (*Understanding* 63). However, these effects are all secondary because they arise from the men's personal reactions to the encounter with the products of Pellegrina's art, that is, with her fictional identities. It is thus not Pellegrina's art itself that survives. Moreover, if one considers the amount of irony inherent in the characters of Pilot and Baron Guildenstern, who are both, in their own way, presented as fools, it is in fact only Lincoln Forsner who is significantly influenced by Pellegrina – and it is arguably her death, caused by his persistence in inquiring who she really is, that leaves a decisive impression on him rather than her role as the prostitute Olalla. From this, it follows that the impact Pellegrina's actions have on her followers is not a direct consequence of any purposeful artistic practice.

What adds to the impression that the female artist is denied artistic independence and agency is the fact that Pellegrina's story is narrated exclusively by men. The frame tale presents Lincoln Forsner twenty years after the events in the Swiss Alps, sailing along the African coast and remembering that fateful stormy night.[7] He introduces his account as a "tale […] that may prove useful" (243), with some parts of Pellegrina's life originally told by Pilot, Baron Guildenstern, and Marcus Cocoza, Pellegrina's friend and protector. Hence, Pellegrina emerges as a character in a male story; she is the object of male creativity and therefore lacks independent creative agency. Indeed, Pellegrina's role is that of a mentor in Lincoln's own (male) *Künstlerroman* with its traditional pattern: a young man breaks with his family and/or society, goes on an extensive journey, which may have geographic, spiritual or intellectual dimensions, has inspiring sexual encounters with a woman older than himself (as Wilhelm Meister with the actress Mariana and Stephen Dedalus with a Dublin prostitute), and finally dedicates himself to art instead of following a conventional course of life. Lincoln's life follows this pattern: He is a young man from a rich, English family, whose "father was not pleased with anything [he] did" (245). After meeting Olalla, he decides to marry her instead of the rich widow to whom he is engaged. However, at that moment, Olalla disappears, and Lincoln follows her

7 For a thorough analysis of the frame tale see Stephens, as well as Sodowsky and Sodowsky.

tracks throughout Europe until their fatal encounter in the Alps. Hence, in "The Dreamers," Pellegrina's female *Künstlerroman* is embedded within its male counterpart and presented as an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to become an artist.

Both of these aspects – that the female artist is involved in a gender struggle (both literally and metatextually) and that she must ultimately fail – are, in fact, emblematic of the female *Künstlerroman*. Although this genre does not rest upon such a long and well-researched tradition as its male counterpart, there are clearly discernable narrative patterns, which are, according to Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, strongly determined by the twentieth-century historical context, in which women – and woman authors – finally acquired "an increased sense of freedom" as they "now for the first time [found] themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs" (Introduction 13). The generic practice of the female *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* of the twentieth century is therefore closely tied to the development of the twentieth-century feminist movement. From this, it follows that coming of age is, for female characters, not merely the struggle male heroes wage against social forces and against a restrictive family background, but primarily a development of a kind of femininity that should be independent of male expectations and impositions. Lyn Pykett finds a similar gender-focus already in the New Woman Fiction of the 1890s, in which "the female artist is represented as an invader of a masculine (or, at least, male-controlled) domain" (138). Another aspect worth noting is that many female coming-of-age stories begin at a later stage than male *Bildungsromane*, "after conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found insufficient" (Abel, Hirsch and Langland, Introduction 7). It is thus highly characteristic that Pellegrina first builds up a role that is socially accepted in an artistic environment – that of a diva – but then transgresses, or rather, rejects, this static identity and replaces it with a plurality of roles that allows for more creative development. Furthermore, her eventual death fits the pattern, as "[t]he deaths in which these fictions often culminate represent […] refusals to accept an adulthood that denies profound convictions and desires" (11). Hence, by choosing death in the Alps, Pellegrina refuses to yield to the men's pressure to abandon her ongoing creative self-invention and to settle on a single, stable identity.

The fact that Pellegrina, despite her strength of character, cannot become a successful, socially accepted creative artist might, in this feminist context, seem surprising or even unsettling, especially if one takes into account the autobiographical motivation of "The Dreamers." Yet, as Pykett has shown in her study of late nineteenth-century *Künstlerromane*, the female artist-protagonists of

these narratives often "break down or give in under the pressures of the various circumstances which conspire against them," which stands in stark contrast to their authors' successful careers (136). Hence, rather than seeking an autobiographical justification for the failure of these artist-protagonists, one should read them as "complex figure[s] with multiple significations," as Pykett suggests (138). In this, female artist-protagonists show a striking similarity with their male counterparts: in the male *Künstlerroman*, the artist's characteristic abandonment of society is usually not drawn from the author's life, but it can be read as a symbol that affirms the superiority of art over life (cf. Chapter 3). In the same way, it seems that the female artist's failure or death in the female *Künstlerroman* is not to be read autobiographically or as a sign of capitulation. Rather, one could argue, it signals that being a woman artist means to be involved in a lifelong struggle for autonomy in a traditionally male domain. Whereas the male *Künstlerroman* ends at the moment when the decision to become an artist has been reached, the female artist-novel goes beyond this symbolic ending and thus centers on the life thereafter. The eventual death of the protagonist that superficially appears as a failure might just as well be a cautionary assertion that the battle is not over yet; thus, it may function as an encouragement to continue.

Ellen McWilliams points out some further differences between the male and the female artist-type when she compares James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*:

> [Woolf's] later critical writings, most famously *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and her portrayal of the female artist in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), provide a powerful counterpoint to the Stephen Dedalus figure. Dedalus's coming of age, which is based on a series of epiphanies and separations from family, nation, and religion, is undercut by Woolf, whose narratives specifically refuse such progressive development. For Dedalus, art is a religious vocation that demands the kind of detachment from life that feminist thinkers have found to be incompatible with the realities of life for the female artist. In *To the Lighthouse*, however, there is a synchronicity between life and art – for example, in the way that Lily finds a domestic muse in the figure of Mrs Ramsay. (18–19)

Especially noteworthy in this quote is the fact that the male artist's rejection of "family, nation, and religion," which signifies the preference for art over life, also draws a clear line of separation between the two. The female artist, in turn, lives in a daily struggle to unite – or at least to reconcile – life and art, as she often lacks the (economic) liberty to take such radical, life-changing decisions as the young male artist-to-be does. Female creativity and the female artist's life script are here presented as more limited, but also much more pragmatic, since

the woman artist is willing to engage in a compromise between her artistic identity and her social duties. Most importantly, however, such narratives challenge the elevated position of art and the glorification of the artist-figure because they favor the integration of art into everyday life, or vice versa, as Lily Briscoe arguably does by drawing inspiration from Mrs Ramsay. From this point of view, Pellegrina's decision to abandon her life as a diva and take her place(s) among the non-artistic part of the population is an important step. By leaving the male-dominated, artificial environment of the opera stage and assuming such common roles as that of a prostitute she not only adapts her artistic skills to the necessities of life in a gesture to reconcile art with life, but she also initiates her search for a genuinely feminine life script.

This competition between male and female artist-types and the merits of their respective *Künstlerromane* is simultaneously enacted in the narrative structure of "The Dreamers." The fact that Pellegrina's story is narrated exclusively by men, and that her life story is just one part of Lincoln's own *Künstlerroman*, as argued above, appears to support the male genre's superiority, as well as the seeming self-reliance of the male hero. However, the insertion of Pellegrina's *Künstlerroman* in Lincoln's coming-of-age story also represents a potentially destabilizing infiltration of the male discourse by feminine or even feminist matter. It works subversively from within, undermining Lincoln's understanding of his encounter with Pellegrina and rendering him an ironic figure because he falsely considers himself the creator of Pellegrina's tale and fails to recognize the primary importance of the female creative act for his own self-fashioning. Moreover, through his narrative, Lincoln reverses the natural order of things: not until the very last pages do readers learn about Pellegrina's true story, told by Marcus Cocoza at her deathbed. In reality, however, her creative act, which consists of shaping her identity as Olalla the prostitute, functions as a premise to set in motion Lincoln's coming of age and his becoming a storyteller.

One could go so far as to claim that this presentation of Lincoln as an ironic figure extends to the genre of the male *Künstlerroman* and lays bare its narrow, masculine worldview. "The Dreamers," in contrast, by exposing the troubling limitations of such a worldview, confidently places itself and the female creative act above this male generic tradition, which has become quite static through the numerous imitations of *Wilhelm Meister*. As Straumann rightly states, "the narrative mode of 'The Dreamers' is feminine, or even feminist, in the way in which it shows, and actually performs, the violence used by the male figures in their narrative framing of Pellegrina" ("A Voice" 34–35). Hence, the narrative structure, which at first sight seems to present Pellegrina's artistic life as secondary to Lincoln's, in fact reverses the order postulated by the male *Künstlerroman*

tradition, in which the female lover or muse functions merely as a catalyst to male creativity. Here, the female creative act is the origin, in accordance with the biological order, in which every man can only emerge from a female womb.

There is one further aspect that shows how Pellegrina's story undermines the male *Künstlerroman*. "The Dreamers" significantly reworks the typical climax of the male *Künstlerroman*, which consists of the artist's sexual initiation, after which he symbolically rejects social life because of the competition between procreation and artistic creation (cf. Chapter 3). At first, Marcus Cocoza's account of Pellegrina's first love affairs, "when she was still a very young girl" ("The Dreamers" 292), reverberates with the function that sexual initiation has in the male *Künstlerroman*. With the help of various literary allusions and extended similes, Cocoza takes great pains to explain that Pellegrina's sexual experiences served to improve her art (292–293). For instance, he asserts that these first encounters with her lovers were necessary for her to "reach […] perfection, on the stage, in the part of the young innocent girl in love" (293). However, these sexual experiences at the same time proved disappointing for young Pellegrina because she realized "that the world was not a much greater place than it is, and […] nothing more colossal, more like the dramas on the stage, took place in it, not even when she herself went into the show [i.e. the love affair] with all her might" (292). Cocoza thus reproduces the male *Künstlerroman*'s point of view, in which sexual experience, though necessary as a catalyst, remains unsatisfactory when considered an end in itself, and inferior to artistic creativity.

However, in Pellegrina's case, this turning away from procreation towards creation – which amounts to the scope that the male *Künstlerroman* covers – is only half the story. Significantly, Pellegrina leaves the domain of art (i.e. the stage), when a burning beam (a powerful phallic symbol) hits and gravely injures her. The artificiality of the stage, "where all the trees, and the houses of the streets, were cardboard only" (294), is unable to resist such powerful heat – or emotional force, in a figurative reading – and bursts into flames. The myth of the artist's superiority, which the diva had pushed to its limit by thinking that "the only sensible thing that any wise person could do was to go and hear Pellegrina Leoni sing" (298), is thereby destroyed. "The Dreamers" thus presents the artistic adolescence that the male *Künstlerroman* covers as only a prelude to maturity, which renders its traditional closure insufficient and provisional. In consequence, such a view qualifies the male protagonist's decision to become an artist and abandon normal social life as immature and misguided. "The Dreamers," following such landmarks of the female *Künstlerroman* tradition as Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, aims at a more reconciliatory solution by consolidating life and art.

In the same way as the narrative structure of "The Dreamers" has been a matter of debate, Blixen's adoption of a male pseudonym presents rich ground for interpretation. It can, on the one hand, be read as motivated by the hope that the presumably male artwork might be received in a more benevolent manner by a reading public still reluctant to take women's writing quite as seriously as male-authored texts. This would support a view that considers Blixen not confident enough to disclose herself as a female author. Yet, although Blixen was reportedly worried about possible negative reactions to her work in Denmark, these fears were not connected with gender questions. Rather, she "felt a deep sense of cleavage between her own work and much of Danish literature during the nineteen-thirties, [which was] predominantly realistic in tone and socially engaged" (Hannah, *'Isak Dinesen'* 67). Blixen, by contrast, "was more interested in private issues of existence than in current events or political views" (Brantly, *Understanding* 4). Moreover, although it was very soon made public who the person behind the pseudonym was, Blixen continued using it for her subsequent publications. With this context in mind, it seems more plausible to consider Blixen's choice of a male pseudonym as a playful manner of pointing her finger at the gender-bias in the reception of literary productions. Much like "The Dreamers," which foregrounds the problem of precedence by framing Pellegrina's creative act with Lincoln's, Blixen, by staging herself as a man, exposes the public's belief that literature must be gendered. From this perspective, Isak Dinesen (the male writer) is presented as an artificial construct created by Karen Blixen (the female artist), and thus the primacy of female creativity is affirmed rather than disguised.

Even within such a feminist reading of "The Dreamers," it is important to point out that Blixen was no radical feminist writer, and she did not explicitly and publicly support the feminist cause (Stecher-Hansen, "Karen Blixen" 191–192). Her works therefore express a moderate view, which Aage Henriksen describes as "a critical, agitated indignation on behalf of women over all the injustice perpetrated on them by men, which we can call the moral aspect of the works" (93). However, he adds, "there is also a countercurrent which consists of consistently maintaining, beyond limits one would think possible to exceed, the relationship between man and woman as a passion" (93). This becomes plainly visible in "The Dreamers." Although male and female creativity are in competition, it is this passionate competition and interaction that eventually prove fruitful for both, and out of which the story as artwork emerges. Brantly, in analyzing the role of dualisms in Blixen's works, observes that Blixen "looks for 'Unity,' or a type of reconciliation, between opposites, [but] it is not at the cost of compromising the integrity and identity of either part of the dualism. […]

Both are equally necessary" (*Understanding* 7). This principle of reconciliation is clearly present in "The Dreamers." Blixen assumes an implicitly feminist stance but strives hard to retain the possibility of a passionate rapprochement between the sexes.

Twenty-three years later, in "Echoes," this balanced way of reconciling masculine with feminine and life with art will be challenged and replaced with quite a different, feminist-existentialist attitude. Significantly, in 1952, Blixen had a talk at a teacher's seminary – the so-called Bonfire Oration, which has been subject to much controversial scrutiny by feminist critics[8] – in which she "urged women of her day to develop in their own way and not to imitate patterns established by men, [advising] them to repossess their femininity" (Donelson and Stecher-Hansen 55). "[T]oday," Blixen opined, a woman "can confidently open her visor and show the world that she is a woman and no disguised rogue" (*Daguerreotypes* 80). The trope of the visor is telling because it is consonant with Blixen's "mask philosophy as presented in 'The Dreamers'" (Johannesson 37), which "projects a world in which all is possible, and over which [the artist] has unlimited power" (37) but also indirectly asserts that this creative and transformative force can only come into use by the help of the masculine mask. This mask – which in "The Dreamers" consists as much of Blixen's male pseudonym as of the male narrators that tell Pellegrina's story and of the appropriation of the male *Künstlerroman* – will disappear completely in "Echoes."

4.3 Writing for Life: "Echoes"

Whereas "The Dreamers" foregrounds a kind of female creativity that depends on, and makes use of, male models of the *Künstlerroman* and presents Pellegrina as unable to entirely transcend the role of the 'passive artifact' that is traditionally assigned to the woman, "Echoes" aims to not only alter this view, but reverse it. Old Pellegrina, in "Echoes," meets a peasant boy named Emanuele and finds that this boy sings with her own singing voice – the voice she lost in the fire. Deciding to teach the boy and turn him into a famous opera singer, Pellegrina stages a reversal of the traditional gendered order in which the male artist shapes his female work of art. She thereby claims the right to produce an artifact that will outlast herself – much in contrast to the Pellegrina of "The Dreamers," whose art, which consists of her fictional identities, must disappear

8 A detailed analysis of the Bonfire Oration and its critical reception is provided in Marianne Stecher-Hansen's essay "Karen Blixen on Feminism and Womanliness: 'En Baaltale med 14 Aars Forsinkelse.'"

as she dies. Old Pellegrina's legacy in the form of Emanuele, in turn, shall literally and figuratively carry her voice into the future and grant her the transcendence the female artist longs for. Yet, this attitude towards gender and art is not the only striking change that "Echoes" performs. It also breaks up the spatio-temporal code of its hypotext and thus challenges the relationship between travelling, creativity, and textual closure that had been established in "The Dreamers."[9] This reworking of the earlier code, in combination with the old-age theme that "Echoes" foregrounds, effects a unique creative interaction between the two stories: a ceaseless creative journey between the early and the late text – between Blixen's young and old Pellegrina – that stubbornly resists closure and affirms the ongoing search for new meaning. This resistance to fixed meaning – and, if one focuses on the protagonist, also the refusal to construct a stable identity – is an attempt to defy death, and Blixen's narrative strategy in "Echoes" can therefore be considered an example of lateness.

4.4 Opening Historical Spaces

The beginning of "Echoes" leaves no doubt that the connection with "The Dreamers" is entirely intended. Indeed, the first sentences carefully specify the temporal setting of "Echoes" in relation to its hypotext:

> In the course of her wanderings Pellegrina Leoni, the diva who had lost her voice, came to a small mountain town near Rome. This happened at the time when she had fled from Lincoln Forsner, whose great passion for her threatened to place her, and to hold her fast, within a definite, continued existence. (153)

Not only do these opening lines establish a connection with "The Dreamers" by adopting its protagonists and its storyline, but the first phrase, "[i]n the course of her wanderings," also emphasizes the story's focus on the topos of travelling. However, "The Dreamers" opens and ends with Lincoln, the main narrator, sailing along the African coast, whereas Pellegrina's own creative voyage must come to an end as her male followers track her down. In "Echoes," by contrast, it is Pellegrina herself who travels at the beginning and at the end. Moreover, the relationship between travelling and creativity appears to be reversed.

9 Genette's terminology of hypertextuality, i. e. hypotext for "The Dreamers" and hypertext for "Echoes," will be used, since it offers some advantages to the terms prequel and sequel, which might be confusing in view of the two stories' complex chronological relationship.

Whereas in "The Dreamers," Pellegrina is creatively active during her travels, when she fashions a new identity for herself, in the hypertext, she acts upon her artifact, Emanuele, during her stay in the mountain town. This is especially noticeable because, in "The Dreamers," travelling can be interpreted as a male quality, and immobility is associated with the female (i.e. with the artifact). Hence, in "Echoes," a fundamental change of paradigm is taking place, which renders untenable any approach that would consider "Echoes" to be just one additional episode in Pellegrina's literary life. Against the backdrop of the deliberate correspondences of characters and timelines, the differences in the way in which the hypotext and its hypertext link space, art, and gender stand out even more starkly.

In view of the conspicuous references to the temporal and spatial parameters of Pellegrina's life story in the opening of "Echoes," it seems particularly surprising that Pellegrina's age in "Echoes" is at odds with that of Pellegrina in "The Dreamers." When she leaves Lincoln Forsner in "The Dreamers," she is still quite young, or middle-aged at most; yet, in the hypertext, Pellegrina is presented as an old woman, and images of physical decay and death permeate the narrative. When the former singer imagines Emanuele's debut on stage, for instance, she pictures herself almost as a corpse: "Would she herself, she wondered, on the first night of Emanuele's appearance, be hidden away in the gallery, an old unknown woman in a black shawl, the corpse in the grave witnessing its own resurrection?" (171). Due to these recurring references to old age and death, Ann Gossman even wrongly identifies the events in "Echoes" as "an episode in Pellegrina's life after her adventures as Olalla, Lola, and Rosalba, and before her death" (321). Hence, the contorted chronology of the two texts opens up gaps that need to be filled in by the reader, sometimes with creative solutions that are virtually incompatible with the texts' literal content.

However, Gossman's lapse not only illustrates the confusion and resulting need for explanation that ensues from Pellegrina's untimely ageing in "Echoes," but it also suggests that there are, indeed, two different ways of describing the temporal relationship between "The Dreamers" and "Echoes." Firstly, from the point of view of story chronology, the events in "Echoes" are to be placed between Pellegrina's encounters with Lincoln in Rome (as Olalla) and with Pilot in Lucerne (as Madame Lola). Taking into account Baron Guildenstern's story, which takes place seven years before Lincoln's and Pilot's, and in which he describes Pellegrina as "a rich young woman" who had, however, "passed her thirtieth year" ("The Dreamers" 264 and 267), one can conclude that Pellegrina is probably no older than forty in "Echoes." Yet, the references to Pellegrina's ageing body in the hypertext undermine this strict adherence to story chron-

ology and draw our attention towards the two short stories' creation and publication history. Instead of obeying the rules of temporal logic within her fictional universe, Pellegrina's ageing process seems to have happened along with the real time that passed between the two texts' production. Hence, the clashing temporality of the two short stories also foregrounds the incompatibility between the notion of time in narrative and in historical reality. Whereas in narrative, time is a stylistic means that allows for great artistic liberty, in real life, time is linear and continuous, and there is no way to suspend it, stop its progression, or even travel back in it.

Pellegrina's premature ageing, by drawing attention towards the time that passes in real life, also establishes a strong connection between the fictional text and its author and thus prepares the ground for an autobiographical reading. Indeed, Pellegrina seems to have grown old along with her author. Blixen herself actually acknowledged the autobiographical nature of "Echoes," explaining that is was "a fictional treatment of her relationship with the young Thorkild Bjørnvig" (Brantly, *Understanding* 167). At the time, Bjørnvig was one of a group of aspiring authors, scholars, and publishers whom Blixen had gathered around herself. She considered him to be one of the most promising literary voices in Denmark and, according to Bjørnvig, they made a pact that he would be the one chosen to continue her mental legacy: "[o]ne day I shall let three-fourths of my spirit remain with you," 64-year-old Blixen wrote in a letter to the poet, who was then half her age (Bjørnvig 26). The parallels with "Echoes" are readily apparent. Just as Blixen desired to teach and influence the young Bjørnvig, Pellegrina decides to train Emanuele's singing voice, which she considers to be the voice she has lost previously.[10] Although such parallels between the author's life and the literary text will not lead to any deeper insights, the fact that "Echoes" draws so heavily on Blixen's life shows her acute awareness of her own ageing, poor health, and approaching death. Moreover, the fact that "Echoes" portrays its middle-aged protagonist as an old woman close to her death illustrates the way in which the author's old age intrudes upon the fictional text and disrupts its unity. "Echoes" thus presents us with a view of old age as an intruder that forces its way into the fictional text even if it does not fit in, which supports the claim that the connection between life and art becomes stronger as the author grows old.

10 See also Donelson and Stecher Hansen: "In 'Echoes' […] the author addresses the problematic relationship between herself and the poet Bjørnvig. She later admitted to the Danish critic Aage Kabell that the story was a spiritual analysis of their falling out. Pellegrina Leoni, the character from "The Dreamers," is used to illustrate the interchange between mentor and disciple" (57).

Such a growing proximity between the work and her author in old age can also be seen in the choice of narrative resources in "Echoes," as they differ considerably from those of its hypotext. Whereas "The Dreamers" relies on an intricate network of frames, narrators, and complex temporal patterns in order to give shape to the figure of Pellegrina, "Echoes" is much more straightforward and features a single, omniscient third-person narrator and chronological narration, which is rather atypical of Blixen's style: "Karen Blixen, under her pseudonym Isak Dinesen, nestles tales within tales within tales" Brantly writes, and she "took […] great pains to distance herself from the events in her tales" (*Understanding* 17). Such narrative strategies, which disguise the "ultimate voice of authority" (17), are certainly present in "The Dreamers." Interestingly enough, however, "Echoes" dispenses with such distraction, with the result that Pellegrina seems a much more life-like character and less a textual figure. The mimetic effect is thus heightened. Indeed, already in the first few sentences of the text, the matter-of-fact tone as well as the precise temporal and geographic references – "This happened at the time when she had fled from Rome" (153) – introduce Pellegrina as if she were a real-life person in a historical setting rather than a character in a tale. Moreover, the narrator more than once gives access to Pellegrina's thoughts, feelings, and intentions, which provides her with psychological depth. This turn towards mimesis in "Echoes" not only breaks with the narrative style of the story's hypotext but is also at odds with the bulk of Blixen's literary productions, which, according to Hannah, "never take any pains to preserve the illusion of reality; […] they are told by a storyteller, and these facts are everywhere openly acknowledged and firmly underlined" (*'Isak Dinesen'* 53). With her reliance on a highly mimetic character, who carries, moreover, strongly autobiographical features, Blixen ties the story much closer to her life than she did in "The Dreamers."

Along with the reduction of narrative complexity and the increase of mimetic effects, "Echoes" also features a lack of closure, which is where the story's style and mood deviate most significantly from those of its hypotext, and where one can locate much of the text's meaning with regard to old age. The lack of, or resistance towards, narrative closure is observable at different levels. Most obviously, the fact that the story's protagonist, Pellegrina, is alive again after having died in "The Dreamers" shows that her story is far from completed. Interestingly, Blixen, upon being asked in a radio interview in 1957 whether she viewed her own life as a tale, gave the following answer: "Yes, I suppose so but in a sense only I can grasp. And, after all, the tale is not yet quite finished!" (Brundbjerg 255). The similarity between Blixen's life and narrative, which the interviewer brings up, is initially confirmed by Blixen, but this equation imme-

diately triggers in her its most obvious point of incompatibility: whereas a narrative is closed and completed in itself, the author's life is an ongoing story, in which each new experience may change the perception and evaluation of its previous events.

Blixen's insistence on this important difference between life and narrative in the radio interview is quite telling in connection with the fact that she resuscitates Pellegrina in "Echoes," as it draws attention to the significance of death and to the question how it can be dealt with – both in narrative and in life. First and foremost, young Pellegrina in "The Dreamers" embraces death as a way of avoiding the confinement of her creative personality to a fixed, stable identity. In "Echoes," old Pellegrina is likewise ready to face death, but under quite different conditions. Having found a work of art (i.e. Emanuele) that will supposedly guarantee her transcendence, she can accept death quite easily: "Were she to die at the end of the respite granted to her," the narrator states in free indirect discourse, "it would be but a small matter" (171). The fact that Pellegrina considers her training of Emanuele to be a period of "respite" acquires a strong metatextual overtone when considering "Echoes" in conjunction with "The Dreamers." Not only has the protagonist been resuscitated by her author – hence been granted a period of respite from death – in order to create a legacy, but she also considers her work with Emanuele to be one "last part bestowed upon her by the director of her theater" (171), which could well be a reference to the orchestrator of her literary universe – the author. By once again taking up the Pellegrina-figure, Karen Blixen grants her alter-ego the same right to continue exercising her artistic and creative abilities that she claims for herself when she declares that her life is "not yet quite finished" (Brundbjerg 255).

Drawing such an analogy between Pellegrina's project of turning Emanuele into a singer and Blixen's decision to revise her Pellegrina-figure gains even more weight when one takes into account the motif of *da capo* that permeates "Echoes." As Pellegrina makes up her mind about teaching Emanuele, she muses: "God likes a *da capo*. […] Pellegrina should be heard again by the world, in that heavenly *da capo* which is also called resurrection" (170, original italics). Since the peasant boy "may well have been born at the hour of the Opera fire in Milan," Pellegrina reasons, he could well be the new Phoenix that came into existence when the old one died in the flames (170). Within these few comments, the text draws quite a complex pattern of how death, resurrection, and artistic creation are related. On the one hand, God seems to be the one who has decided on the *da capo*, hence providing Emanuele with Pellegrina's voice at the moment at which the old Phoenix died in the fire in Milan. On the other hand, the *da capo* – the resurrection of Pellegrina's voice – can only come into being

if she decides to take on the task of shaping Emanuele's career. In other words, the artist's transcendence depends both on God's providence and man's willingness to fulfill the role assigned to him/her, and the task is "in itself divine," as Pellegrina comments (171).

Yet, these clarifications about resurrection and leaving an artistic legacy only provide insight into Blixen's choice to rewrite Pellegrina if one relates them to an additional comment Pellegrina makes when she imagines Emanuele's debut on stage:

> Christ Himself, she remembered, when risen from His grave had dwelt for only forty days among His disciples, yet upon these forty days the whole world had built up its creed. Her audience, her guilt boxes and her pits and her beloved galleries would hear Pellegrina sing once more, would bear witness, with its own ears, to a miracle, and would build upon it its hope of salvation. (170)

The juxtaposition of Christ's appearance after his resurrection with the reappearance of Pellegrina's voice to her audience not only sacralizes the artist and her task, but it also shows that it is not primarily Pellegrina's own salvation that is at stake. On the contrary: just like Christ, she would be willing to die if her example were to provide humanity with the "hope of salvation." Hence, in stark contrast to young Pellegrina in "The Dreamers," who in her self-centeredness and love of artistic liberty prefers death to being of use to her lovers, old Pellegrina sees herself as "nothing but a messenger sent out on a long journey, to tell people that there is hope in the world" (161).

With this image of the artist as a messenger in the service of humanity, who through the lasting effect of her art provides solace in view of imminent death, Blixen would reproduce quite a traditional view devoid of any feminist undertones were it not for the fact that Pellegrina fails in her attempt to carry out her task. The villagers misinterpret her close relationship with the boy and her liberal way of giving away her riches and in fact suspect Pellegrina to be a witch or a vampire, or even to be dealing with the devil. In a last attempt to convince Emanuele of the opposite, Pellegrina chases him through the village until his way is obstructed and he can go no further. The scene establishes an obvious analogy with Pellegrina's flight from her lovers in "The Dreamers," with the crucial difference that Pellegrina is the pursuer here. Having been hit by a stone thrown by Emanuele and thus being forced to turn back, Pellegrina suddenly realizes that in claiming the role of the *male* artist, whose supposed task is to produce a lasting artifact, she has also taken on all the oppressive male qualities under which she herself suffered in "The Dreamers." When she began to teach Emanuele, she exclaimed in triumph: "I have got my talons in him. He will not

escape me" (172). In the end, however, after having lost Emanuele's trust, she must acknowledge that her attempt to combine a male artist's attitude towards art with female social roles – her attempt to become Emanuele's teacher, mother, sister, and lover at the same time (175–176) – produces "the hissing of a gander" instead of "the roar of a lioness" (187). And, what is more, as Pellegrina guiltily observes, she, "who ha[d] so often been begged to stay on, who ha[d] been held back and ha[d] been pursued, [that day took] pleasure in being the pursuer" (188).

With this conscious withdrawal of the female artist from the territory of male art production, "Echoes" performs a more radically feminist move than "The Dreamers" and adds an existentialist tinge to it. While Pellegrina's death in "The Dreamers" is the result of social – and specifically male – oppression, the hypertext abstains from foregrounding such social constraints and victimizing the woman artist. Rather, it presents Pellegrina's initial endeavor to create a lasting artifact as misguided in itself. It is certainly no coincidence that the "heavenly *da capo*" (170, original italics), the "traveling […] toward a goal" (171), which seems so attractive to Pellegrina early on in "Echoes," is in each mentioning short of its usual complement '*al fine*.' The resistance towards closure, which manifests itself in Pellegrina's turning away from producing an artifact, in fact reflects Karen Blixen's later views on gender, which she revealed most famously in 1952 in her Bonfire Oration. In this speech, Blixen draws an image of men and women as clearly differentiable by their nature. Whereas men, Blixen contends, are publically recognized for their deeds and thus characterized by them, women realize their potential and unfold their influence through what they *are* (*Daguerreotypes* 73). She further explains: "[…] the man creates something by himself but outside of himself and often, when it is finished, abandons it and pushes it out of his consciousness in order to start on something else. The woman's function is to expand her own being" (73). This apparently anti-feminist view, which seems to expect women to withdraw from the public spheres of decision-making and achievement, gave rise to protests on behalf of Danish feminists after its radio broadcast in 1953 (Stecher-Hansen, "Karen Blixen" 194). However, Blixen firmly underlines what she sees as a woman's essence precisely because she believes that women have been trying to adapt to male values for too long, and that it is time to shift towards embracing feminine values, too – for all of society:

> Indeed, our time can be said to need a revision of its ambition from *doing* to *being*. […] I wish to insinuate into the minds of the women of our time as well as those of the men, that they should meditate not only upon what they may accomplish but most profoundly upon what they are. (*Daguerreotypes* 85–86, original italics)

Hence, men are likewise summoned to shift from goal orientation to a cultivation of their essential qualities – a turn "from gender to the individual" that results in an "existentialist plea" (Stecher 75).

In accordance with Blixen's view that a completed artifact is not an adequate expression of lifelong growth and development, "Echoes" has Pellegrina take the final and firm resolution that "the voice of Pellegrina Leoni […] will not be heard again" (189). However, how are Blixen's view in the Bonfire Oration and Pellegrina's resolution in "Echoes" to be aligned with the fact that the author did, with "Echoes," not only execute her personal *da capo*, but also conduct it *al fine*? After all, the narrative is a completed, published literary text. This apparent performative contradiction can be resolved – or at least given a different perspective – by considering "Echoes" to be an 'unmaking' of "The Dreamers." Firstly, by having Pellegrina take up her wandering again at the end of "Echoes," Blixen suggests that Pellegrina's search for personal development has not ended. More importantly, however, with the deliberate inclusion of incompatible story elements, the change of narrative strategies, and a markedly different attitude towards gender and art, Blixen has carefully avoided the kind of artwork that would prompt any conclusive interpretation. As Gossman rightly states, "'Echoes' and 'The Dreamers,' when first considered together, seem mutually exclusive; but it is evident that they actually supplement one another to form a kind of paradoxical truth" (321).

What Gossman, without much further specification, calls "a paradoxical truth" is in fact the most important effect that the publication of "Echoes" has achieved, and it comes more clearly to the fore if one considers the two texts' complex chronology. Pellegrina's continuation of her travels at the end of "Echoes" could be called paradoxical because of the fact that her lifeline takes her forward and backward at the same time. If one characterizes the episode in "Echoes" as an insertion into the story narrated in "The Dreamers," Pellegrina will later, as it were, travel back to "The Dreamers" and meet her fate in the alpine snow storm. However, if one reads Pellegrina's lifeline and ageing process in a historical / autobiographical way, aligning it with Blixen's, as exposed above, one must conclude that the female artist travels forward into an unknown future. Rather than calling it a paradox, one could regard this feature as a structural ambiguity: it shows that Pellegrina's creative journey calls for a theory of creativity in old age that continuously integrates both past achievements and future possibilities. Just as old Pellegrina has to decide each day "whether to go to the right or to the left" ("Echoes" 164), old age demands a particular flexibility because it subjects one to rapidly changing life circumstances.

The deliberate incompatibilities and gaps in the joint narrative that results from "The Dreamers" and "Echoes" not only demand creativity in the interpretation of each individual text, but they also open up a space *between* the two stories, thus projecting the new theory of creativity 'outward,' to a level outside the literary universe. Pellegrina's travelling on, which is so strongly associated with the ongoing search for new creative means, thus finds its mirror in real life, in which Blixen and her readers are encouraged to continuously adapt their views regarding female creativity while travelling back and forth between the two literary texts. As Simone Heller-Andrist has shown in her study of framing devices, and specifically in her treatment of prequel and sequel (using the example of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*), a parallel consideration of two texts with "disparate sets of information" will "force the reader into an active role" (243). More importantly, however, "the textual interaction […] shows at what price we strive for compatibility and a functioning dialogue": it foregrounds "our precipitate acceptance of congruities at the expense of a remaining amount of incongruous information" (243–244). In other words, the reading and interpretation of a text always require a filling in of certain gaps, but in the case of such complex parallel readings, our attention is drawn to *the way* in which we perform this task and to the fact that it can never be fully accomplished. Hence, not only does the addition of "Echoes" to the Pellegrina saga break up closure by temporarily resuscitating her, but it actually breaks with the concept of closure itself, making a strong plea for an ongoing creative re-evaluation of the past.

4.5 Blixen's Lateness: A Conscious Gesture

Opening up such an inter-textual space of meaning-making is fully in accord with Blixen's rhetorical strategy, which, according to a recent study by Stecher, consists in a "creative dialectic." Analyzing Blixen's numerous essays and talks, Stecher observes that the Danish author "considers opposing viewpoints and the contradictions between them before arriving at an alternative and original viewpoint that represents a synthesis of perspectives" (12). Moreover, Blixen views the "interaction of opposites" as a "'creative unity,'" from which "history evolves in a dialectic process" (17) and which constitutes the "origin of inspiration and artistic creativity" (18). By producing two texts, "The Dreamers" and "Echoes," which put forth different – if not opposing – concepts, Blixen thus creates ideal conditions for artistic creativity. Yet, in contrast to the rhetorical method she uses in her essays, she here decides to omit the synthesis and to

leave untold the final episode of the creative journey, thereby acknowledging that life continues and that its ever-changing circumstances raise the need for flexibility. This affirmation of life comes at the expense of closure and, more incisively, at the expense of the illusion that death grants freedom ("The Dreamers") or transcendence ("Echoes"). However, with this gesture, Blixen remains faithful to her final proposition on art in the Bonfire Oration: "'To be a poet is not to make a poem'" she quotes the Danish scientist Paul la Cour, "'but to find a new way to live'" (*Daguerreotypes* 87). Indeed, Blixen goes even further and shows that, under certain circumstances, "making a poem" *is* "finding a new way to live."

The parallels that are established here between the Bonfire Oration and "Echoes" in order to make a claim for Blixen's late style might seem arbitrary, especially because Blixen wrote the Bonfire Oration at least five years before the publication of "Echoes," hence some ten years before her death. Accordingly, one could refrain from insisting on the connection between the two texts – were it not for the last sentence of the Bonfire Oration. Having finished her argument with the quote from la Cour, Blixen addressed her audience and stated: "If you cannot applaud what I have said, pray be indulgent towards it" (*Daguerreotypes* 87). Any aficionado of English literature will recognize the reference; this last sentence is a partial paraphrase of Prospero's epilogue in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's last play.[11] In this highly metatextual ending of the play, Prospero addresses the audience, asking for applause and indulgence so that he may be "set free."

> Now that my charms are all o'erthrown,
> And what strength I have's mine own,
> Which is most faint. Now, 'tis true
> I must be here confined by you,
> Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
> Since I have my dukedom got
> And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
> In this bare island by your spell;
> But release me from my bands
> With the help of your good hands

11 *The Tempest* is not the last theatrical project in which Shakespeare was involved, as he collaborated with John Fletcher on three more plays: *All Is True*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and *Cardenio*. According to Greenblatt, however, "none of these latter plays is a wholly personal vision […] *The Tempest* is the last play Shakespeare wrote more or less completely on his own – no collaborator and, as far as is known, no direct literary source" (373).

Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant:
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free. *Exit.*
(*The Tempest*, Epilogue)

The epilogue's message operates on several levels. On the one hand, old Prospero has renounced his powerful magic and is now thrown back onto his own, weak body and consequently in need of help for a safe journey home ("what strength I have's mine own, / Which is most faint"). On the other, the theater company depends on the audience's applause ("your good hands") for the play's success. Most importantly, however, many scholars and theater directors consider Prospero's epilogue to be a personal address by Shakespeare, announcing his retirement from the world of theater.[12] *The Tempest* has, in Stephen Greenblatt's words, "the air of a farewell, a valediction to theatrical magic, a retirement" (373). Indeed, Shakespeare is believed to have left London shortly after staging *The Tempest* in order to spend his remaining years in Stratford upon Avon. Although such an autobiographical reading of Prospero's Epilogue might not be entirely justified by the historical facts, which are partly inaccessible (cf. Greenblatt 378–379), McMullan has shown that *The Tempest* has come to be viewed "as the supreme embodiment of late Shakespeare," which "demonstrates Shakespeare's centrality to the idea of late style as it developed in twentieth-century literary culture" (318). From this, it follows that Blixen, with her conscious adoption of Prospero's language in her final sentence of the Bonfire Oration, actively assumes the stance of the ageing writer who makes a last statement – the same stance she takes when labeling the volume of stories that holds "Echoes" '*Last Tales*.'

One could even go so far as to suggest that Blixen's reference to Prospero's epilogue shows that she was acutely aware of the phenomenon of late style. After all, she was not only a connoisseur of Shakespeare's works but also an extremely able and well-read literary critic. That she would consciously embark

12 See McMullan (318–353) for an analysis of relatively recent examples of staging *The Tempest* in which the directors identified Prospero with Shakespeare.

on a search for her own late phase as her health was deteriorating and death was approaching is therefore not implausible. Yet, she would not just present her readers with her late writing but make her search for novelty in artistic form palpable in her tales and thereby disclose her identity as an ageing artist – in the same way as she had always deliberately staged herself as a public figure.

It might thus not be only a coincidence that the joint narrative of "The Dreamers" and "Echoes" inspired at least one further artist in his late phase. In 1980, Orson Welles started working on a project to turn Pellegrina's story into a film. Although he did not find enough financial support for the film (which was originally to be titled *Da Capo*), he produced a few scenes at his own expense, some twenty minutes of footage, which film scholar Peter Tonguette has called "the most personal of Welles' late projects" (par. 8). Tonguette's analysis of the fragmentary material lacks any clear explanation of what is 'late' about the project; yet the fact that he uses the terms "late film" (title; par. 14), "late work" (par. 5; par. 19), "late project" (par. 5; par. 24) and "late career" (par. 18) as a matter of course suggests that the idea of lateness has become a commonplace in film making and film analysis, just as it has permeated the worlds of music, painting, and literature. Whilst more and more writers are using their concerns about old age and creativity as raw material for their artistic output – whether as explicitly as John Barth and Joan Didion or as obliquely as Karen Blixen – the notion of late style has become increasingly widespread and influential and, accordingly, is now producing real effects as a consciously adopted stylistic choice. This, in turn, renders common accusations of overly autobiographical readings void. Writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (with Karen Blixen as a precursor) may, in other words, be making a decisive step in late style's advancement from a mere scholarly idea towards a purported universal of creative production, a code of meaning-making within the text itself and within the artist's life.

5 Getting Old, Getting Real: Joan Didion's Late Autobiography

> We cannot know what lasts or will outlast us: we nonetheless prepare our work for strangers – viewers, listeners, and readers we may never meet. […] it's the reception of the piece and not its production that counts. But to the aging writer, painter, or musician the process can signify more than the result.
>
> (Delbanco, *Lastingness* 16)

5.1 The Autobiographical Project as Artistic and Communicative Practice

Whereas John Barth's late fiction relies heavily on notions of the *Künstlerroman* and finds itself caught in a struggle to break up, challenge, and complicate its fixed generic conventions, and Karen Blixen's late treatment of Pellegrina Leoni renegotiates her earlier take on female creativity, Joan Didion's autobiographical portrait of ageing, *Blue Nights*, posits itself against another narrative tradition, that of life writing in general, and autobiography in particular. It might seem daring to follow up the preceding discussion of late style in narrative fiction with an autobiographical novel, since it implicitly suggests that fiction and autobiography are comparable, at least with regard to stylistic features. Yet, including Didion's autobiography is a logical consequence within the line of argument pursued so far. Setting out from the symbolic, abstract, and ironic writing of John Barth, I then turned to Karen Blixen's life and tales, using the connection between the Danish author and her work as a premise to explore her late-style strategies. This movement against the poststructuralist treatment of textuality along the motto of Jacques Derrida's famous statement "il n'y pas de hors-text"[1] may not in itself inevitably lead to autobiography. However, it

1 For a discussion of the theoretical context in which Derrida's statement was issued, and on the different ways in which it was understood and reused by other poststructuralist

would be a sign of capitulation – and the missing of an opportunity – to stop short of reaching the most challenging of literary modes in the life-work debate and gauging this approach to late style against the intricacies of the autobiographical discourse.

Indeed, if one acknowledges that old age, physical decline, and proximity to death exert an influence on an artist's creativity and style – in other words, if one acknowledges the author's life as a precedent to the literary text, both in its temporal and causal sense – then autobiographical writing will allow for a promising discussion of lateness. Due to its disputed position between history and fiction, autobiography has been the object of a renewed interest in author-related criticism and theory since the 1980s, when the 'death of the author' was still celebrated rather than mourned. This engagement with autobiography was, on the one hand, triggered by a need to "contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries" (Anderson 2) and, on the other, it was aimed at exploring autobiographical writing as a "testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction" (1–2).

Within this diverse field of theoretical approaches, it was argued more than once that autobiography did not actually exist, or, on the opposite end, that all writing (including criticism) was in fact autobiographical.[2] One of the most influential contributions to this upsurge of discourses was Paul de Man's essay "Autobiography as De-facement," which is important to address if one is to explore the difference between autobiography and fiction. In his essay, de Man criticizes earlier theoretical endeavors to treat autobiography as a genre:

> Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighbouring or even incompatible genres. (920)

De Man is equally dismissive of attempts that aim at a separation of autobiography and fiction. Although one could declare the former to operate on "a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis" (920), in fact, "the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either / or po-

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thinkers, see Peter Childs' *Texts: Contemporary Cultural Texts and Critical Approaches* (5–7).

2 See, for instance, Gerri Reaves' observation that "theorists and critics are reaching the consensus that all texts are autobiographical (including literary criticism and scientific writing, for example) and thereby deny the existence of the genre as a discrete category" (11).

larity but […] it is undecidable" (921), de Man suggests.[3] He concludes that autobiography "is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (921). What happens in autobiographical writing, according to de Man, is that the author tries "to endow his inscription within the text with all the attributes of a face in order to mask or conceal his own fictionalization or displacement by writing" (Anderson 13). Autobiography is thus a form of prosopopoeia, a substitution of the author's life by a figure of language, and, as such, it is governed by the same representational paradoxes as any other text.

Within the poststructuralist line of argument de Man adopts, there is little one could do to counter his claim, and he is certainly right to draw attention to the fact that "whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of the medium" (920, original italics).[4] Yet, the intricacies of language and representation are not the only characteristics of the autobiographical discourse. Just as relevant and productive as de Man's deconstructionist approach is a consideration of autobiography as an act of communication between the author and his or her audience, and thus as the author's gesture to reveal him- or herself to the public. Such a revelation is accompanied by some risks, however. As soon as elderly authors draw attention to themselves and their old age, the culturally dominant image of decline is triggered, which audiences may then transfer to the work itself and to its artistic value, reading the narrative of decline into the author's oeuvre. Hence, autobiographies of old age, even more than fictional works, are likely to fall prey to the negative stereotyping of the late-style discourse, since author and work seem to be conflated in the text, and its style *must* become the image of its author. From a slightly different perspective, one could also say that autobiography, with its centering on the author, shifts the focus from the product (the work of art) to its producer (the artist). Hence, a shift from language to life takes place, and materiality and mortality are presented as more important principles than mere textuality.

It is in these terms that late style will be analyzed and assessed in Joan Didion's latest autobiographical novel, *Blue Nights*. Thus, the aim is to trace how Didion's lifelong trust in textual independence is, in old age, gradually replaced by a

3 This undecidability is also noted by James Olney, but he takes it as a challenge to investigate the intricacies of autobiography rather than as a reason to dismiss it altogether ("Autobiography" 4–5).

4 A similar stance on the generic limitations of autobiography was taken in my former publication "Ageing, Agency, and Autobiography: Challenging Ricoeur's Concept of Narrative Identity."

recognition of preceding material reality – of her own faltering body and mind. For this purpose, the stylistic techniques of *Blue Nights* will be contrasted with those of two of its predecessors, Didion's 1979 essay "The White Album" and her 2005 autobiographical novel *The Year of Magical Thinking*. It will be argued that the two earlier texts make use of similar textual strategies to cope with anterior reality, whereas *Blue Nights* operates with fundamentally different means: it develops its own late style.

When Joan Didion, aged 76, published her last work so far, *Blue Nights* (2011), she was looking back on some years of severe trial, a period that had influenced her writing to a great extent. In December 2003, her husband had died of a coronary failure, and in August 2005, she had also lost her adoptive daughter, Quintana Roo, who for one and a half years had fought a complicated illness without any clear medical diagnosis. Whereas the first of these personal tragedies is clearly the subject of *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), which was received as the author's official 'memoir of mourning' and celebrated as a masterful literary treatment of trauma, *Blue Nights* is only seemingly its equivalent for coming to terms with the loss of her daughter. Although, in *Blue Nights*, Didion initially sets out to explore her relationship with Quintana by narrating her memories of Quintana's childhood and youth, it soon becomes evident that *Blue Nights* is markedly different from its predecessor, most especially with regard to its structure and style.

Full of commentaries about the difficulties Didion is experiencing as she is writing the text, *Blue Nights* is a record of the arduous search for language and literary means to adequately express Didion's fear of *her own* frailty and death. After roughly half of the text, she takes stock and realizes:

> All I know is that writing […] no longer comes easily to me. For a while I laid this to a certain weariness with my own style, an impatience, a wish to be more direct. I encouraged the very difficulty I was having laying words on the page. I saw it as evidence of a new directness. I see it differently now. I see it now as frailty. (105)

This excerpt highlights Didion's awareness that her style is in the process of changing; she apparently wishes for "a new directness" that will be distinguishable from her former style. However, at this stage in the text, she is uncertain about the causes behind her search for stylistic novelty. Is it the need for a different, more adequate form of expression in the light of her different circumstances? Or is she simply no longer able to write as she used to? She asks herself: "What if I can never again locate the words that work?" (111). Didion thus draws an image of herself as an author with a dwindling writing capacity

rather than a late stylist, that is, a genius in her last, highly creative and productive phase; she thus seems to confirm the culturally dominant peak-and-decline model. Yet, if one takes Didion's comments about her diminishing artistic ability at face value, what about the fact that *Blue Nights* is a creative achievement and a published work that sells quite well? There seems to be a performative contradiction. How, then, is this self-portrayal to be gauged against theories of late style? Shall *Blue Nights* be assessed as the surrender to the overwhelming reality of the author's frailty or be viewed as a last, masterful stroke of a late genius?

These questions are not the only ones to tackle when comparing the two autobiographical accounts. A further field to explore – and this will be the first step – are the narrative strategies Didion employs in order to regain agency where control has been lost through the traumatic experiences in connection with the passing away of her husband and daughter. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, she draws on her usual method to deal with challenging life circumstances – as she did in "The White Album" as well: she uses the textual space to frame and contain the traumatic event and thus, in a traditional way, affirms the healing power of the trauma memoir, which Luckhurst defines as "the redemptive account of how the posttraumatic self might be re-configured around its woundedness" (91). By doing so, Didion eventually presents herself as the masterful writer her audience knows so well: the author who employs her "signature prose style" with "icy control" (92). In *Blue Nights*, by contrast, this changes quite drastically, which suggests that the trauma of growing old and frail requires different literary means. However, will a late-style narrative be capable of performing this function? In what ways will the narration of the search for a new style counteract the fear of frailty and death? According to Didion herself, it will not. In 2011, aged 76 and commenting on the difficulties she experienced while writing *Blue Nights*, Didion said: "I used to say I was a writer, but it's less up front now. Maybe because it didn't help me" (Tuhy 42). Whether this statement refers to *Blue Nights* only or to Didion's whole life as a writer remains unresolved. When comparing the coping strategies in "The White Album" and *The Year of Magical Thinking* with those of *Blue Nights*, however, what comes to the fore are their different attitudes towards the relationship between life, text, and the persona of the writer, and the ways in which these three entities depend on each other.

The question as to whether an autobiographical narrative only records the anterior reality of the writer's life, or whether, on the contrary, the text shapes the writer's sense of herself takes us back to Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-facement," where he asks:

> We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life [...]? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent [the author's life] determine the figure [the autobiographical text], or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity? (920–921, original italics)

What de Man suggests by way of his rhetorical questions is that reality itself – or at least our understanding of it – is produced by the way we talk and write about it, that is, ultimately by the linguistic and literary resources that we have at our disposal. Such an understanding of autobiography as shaping the author's life rather than vice versa is certainly at the center of *The Year of Magical Thinking* (if not of any conventional trauma memoir), because the production of the text constitutes a kind of narrative healing and thus at least partly determines the writer's future identity.

However, as already argued above, such a consideration of the autobiographical project disregards the relationship between the author and her audience, as well as the author's decision to present herself in a certain light, as a certain persona (one may well talk about 'intention' here, were it not for the word's negative connotation in critical theory). In other words, what is lost is the concept of literature as communication with a sender and a receiver and an intended message. More recent narratological studies focus on precisely this act of communication, attempting to locate its inscription within the text itself. James Phelan, for instance, works "within a broader approach to narrative communication, one rooted in a conception of narrative as rhetoric, that is, a multilayered, purposeful communication from an author to an audience" ("Voice" 50). He states that "in many cases the communicative effects authors seek depend substantially on their ability to convey – and the audience's ability to hear – tone. And our ability to hear tone typically depends on our attending to a combination of stylistic and contextual features of an utterance" (50). Thus, the analysis of style is of paramount importance in the study of autobiography as communication.

Indeed, studying autobiography (or writing it, for that matter), becomes obsolete if the text is not considered within such a communicative setting. If one neglects the author and her possible motives in publishing the text, as well as

questions of communicative ethics,[5] one may as well read an autobiography as if it were fiction. This is precisely what late-style autobiography attempts to counteract. In *Blue Nights*, Didion's persona appears much more 'real' and less stylized and constructed by text-related circumstances. She enacts what Michael Spitzer observes as a "'stepping back from appearance'" in late works (63). However, what is it that motivates this move away from an understanding of the autobiographical text as an independent textual product, in which the author is just a textual figure, and towards a conception of autobiography as communication, as a message directed at an audience? The analysis and discussion of Didion's three works suggests that the static quality of the author's persona, as produced by a traditional autobiographical narrative, is inadequate for addressing the demands of an ageing artist in a state of frailty and fear.

Whereas the desire of overcoming trauma, as in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, is perfectly compatible with such a fixed authorial figure, this is no longer the case when the core 'traumatic event' lies in the future: increasing decline and death. In such a situation, the text as a finalized product loses its importance, and the process of its production as *artistic and communicative practice* moves center stage. As Nicholas Delbanco suggests, "the process can signify more than the result" (16), and he emphasizes "how inspiring it is to keep a routine. If nothing else, if offers up the comfort of continuity" (13). When Didion, in *Blue Nights*, foregrounds the production process of the text to such an extent that the supposed primary (life) narrative disappears over large stretches, she initially seems to enact the view that her life is constituted by the linguistic product she creates. Yet, the fact that her efforts generate no narrative lifeline in its traditional sense and the work instead comes to resemble a theoretical discussion of late style calls for a different approach to *Blue Nights*, an approach that views the author as simultaneously a productive artist, an intellectual critic, and a mortal, common individual. Interestingly, however, it is precisely the hybridity and fluidity of such an authorial construct that resists the work's categorization in terms of the late-style debate and thus evades any judgment of its author as either a 'late genius' or an 'artist in decline.'

5 Philip Lejeune's seminal text *On Autobiography* deals amply with the subject of communicative ethics in autobiographical writing. He argues that by using their own names for their autobiographical protagonists, authors enter a "narrative pact" with their readers and therefore submit themselves to certain rules, among them truthfulness (17).

5.2 Style and Stability: The Emergence of Didion's Authorial Persona

Joan Didion is particularly interesting for the purpose of examining a late-style narrative with an 'autobiographical gesture' because of her special status as an icon of American New Journalism, which marks her as a person of high achievement, yet simultaneously as a representative of the common people. As Roger Luckhurst states, Didion was "one of the preemptive practitioners of the literary journalism that took the personal turn with Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson and others in the 1960s" (92), but Didion's fame reaches far beyond her writing. She and her husband John Gregory Dunne were arguably America's most celebrated writing couple and as such important members of high society. Not only did Didion influence the public's opinion on political and social themes, but she also functioned as a style icon,[6] a role that she has kept even in her old age. When her aged face, partly covered by huge black sunglasses, featured on the posters of an ad campaign by the fashion label Céline in January 2015, the news and the images went around the globe in no time. 'Ageing – but with style,' was the common reaction, and *The Guardian* commented: "[T]he image encapsulates all that is considered chic right now […]. Didion's age is not hidden but celebrated – she's all sleek grey hair and formidable bone structure" (Marriot par. 1–2). In a similar way as her body became the epitome of successful ageing with the Céline ad campaign, Didion's novel *The Year of Magical Thinking*, very soon after its publication, began to function as "the one indispensable handbook to bereavement" (Hare par. 2), "filling the display windows of every bookshop in New York in the winter of 2005" (Luckhurst 92) and becoming "a cultural event" (93).[7] Didion seemed to master it all: how to mourn successfully and how to age successfully, and, most importantly, how to do so in an elegant way, becoming an example to follow for many. Interestingly, Didion rarely described herself explicitly as a confident person in her autobiographical writing; her public image is thus to a certain extent at odds with her own self-portrayal. The prevailing positive image arises from Didion's

6 *Legendary Authors and the Clothes They Wore* by Terry Newman, a book that portrays fifty writers who exerted a remarkable influence on fashion, dedicates a chapter to Joan Didion and even features her photograph on its front cover. Moreover, Megan Garber, in *The Atlantic*, argues that "Didion, particularly after the releases of *The Year of Magical Thinking* in 2007 (sic) and *Blue Nights* in 2011 introduced her to new audiences, has ascended to a very particular place within celebrity's arbitrary firmament: She is now an icon, and a brand, and a Living Legend" (par. 4).

7 In 2014, a decade after *The Year of Magical Thinking* was published, Marta Bladek highlights "its by now canonical status as the exemplary grief memoir" (937).

use of stylistic tools, which create a stable image of the authorial persona and eventually confirm that writing serves as an aid in understanding and assimilating lived reality.

5.3 Style on Display: "The White Album"

In a chapter on Joan Didion's confessional literature, Katie Roiphe criticizes some contemporary voices who praise Didion's autobiographical novels *Where I Was From* and *The Year of Magical Thinking* for their deeply personal content. She complains: "[H]as her writing ever been that intimate, that personal, that raw? Has her confessional style ever been much more than just that, a style?" (103). Indeed, Didion's authorial persona in her personal or "confessional" writing could be reduced to "just" a style – but it is precisely through stylistic means that the characteristics of this persona come to the fore. Didion's style, which suggests control and a certain aloofness at all times, not only has a history of critical reception,[8] but Didion herself also extensively commented on her writing techniques – most famously in her 1967 essay "Why I Write." In this short text, Didion describes herself as a highly self-reflexive author: "Like many writers I have only this one 'subject,' this one 'area': the act of writing. I can bring you no reports from any other front. […] I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear" (5–6). At the same time, she twists her image as a journalist, suggesting that she is no neutral, factual reporting voice but a kind of mirror reflecting the social and political realities of her time through her own yearnings and anxieties.

This use of herself as a substitute object of cultural analysis, which, on the one hand, conveys a uniquely subjective view, but, on the other, suggests being representative of a vast majority of the American population, is also at the core of Didion's often-quoted essay "The White Album" with its famous opening:

> We tell ourselves stories in order to live. […] We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers,

8 For analyses of Didion's style, see, for instance, Marc Weingarten's *The Gang that Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and the New Journalism Revolution*, Janis P. Stout's *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion*, as well as Jason Mosser's *The Participatory Journalism of Michael Herr, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion: Creating New Reporting Styles.*

> by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.
>
> Or at least we do so for a while. I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself […]. (185)[9]

Didion wrote this text in response to a time she deemed utterly shocking and confusing: the late 1960s, when an upsurge of popular culture came along with acts of brutal and senseless violence. Writing retrospectively and with the temporal distance of almost a decade, she comments on her initial difficulty to come to terms with the events of that period. Indeed, Didion's reaction extended far beyond her inability to write a coherent story. She experienced attacks of nausea and vertigo and was declared mentally ill, albeit with no clear diagnosis. In "The White Album," she describes, for example, how she could no longer think causally and rationally:

> During the years when I found it necessary to revise the circuitry of my mind I discovered that I was no longer interested in whether the woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor jumped or did not jump, or in why. I was interested only in the picture of her in my mind: her hair incandescent in the floodlights, her bare toes curled inward on the stone ledge. (209)

What we witness in this retrospective account, however, is not Didion's former inability to "write a story." Rather, it is a change from one potential subject – the woman who is to commit suicide – to another: Didion's procedure to cope with senseless events. Moreover, the description of this shift from Didion's former preoccupation with the 'why' to her interest in the 'picture in her mind' is in itself a storyline, the narrative of a process which one could term aestheticization. In other words, Didion writes about her own artistic processing of anterior reality, confirming what she disclosed to be her subject in "Why I Write." From this point of view, "The White Album" is quite a typical addition to Didion's oeuvre.

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9 Elizabeth Nicholas remarks that a "cursory Google search of those opening lines reveals that they have been used by none less than a Christian evangelist, a postmodern philosopher, a business leadership consultant, a Beatles biographer, and *Into Thin Air* author John Krakauer." What Nicholas does not mention, however, is that the vast majority of reproductions of this opening end after its first, positive-sounding paragraph, thus cutting short or even distorting Didion's argument (e. g. Maftei 73–74). This is another example in which Didion's audience suppresses those parts of her texts expressing doubts about herself as a writer, and it illustrates the public's desire to believe in authorial control.

"The White Album" also offers insight into the way Didion copes with her personal illness through a textual strategy that she will implement almost identically in *The Year of Magical Thinking*: the incorporation and framing of a medical report in her writing. In "The White Album," she reproduces her own psychiatric report, which describes her personality as being "in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress" (187). Such a report would seem to disqualify her as a reliable observer and thus undermine her role as a journalist and essayist, since it seems that the essay – as Samuel Cohen phrases it – "refuses […] the pose of objectivity" (142). However, Didion frames the report with the commentary that her mental disorder "does not now seem to [her] an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968" ("The White Album" 188). She thus reestablishes herself as the 'mirror,' who with her illness shows a better-suited reaction to the events than, for instance, her friends and acquaintances, who reacted quite coolly to the Tate-La-Bianca murders in 1969 and were not "surprised" (208). Didion's own response to the late 1960s, in contrast, appears to be appropriate.

At the same time, the incorporation of the psychiatric report into her own essay is an act of appropriation, by which Didion claims the right to both her diagnosis and her cure, apparently confirming the healing power of writing. Since the attending neurologist has no other treatment on offer than advising Didion to "[l]ead a simple life," although he admits that it will not make "any difference we know about" (211), Didion resorts to her writing. One should not disregard, however, that this is only possible in retrospection after some years. Moreover, what Didion undertakes in "The White Album" is to rationalize and justify her illness rather than cure it. Hence, what she comes to terms with is the fact that she is vulnerable, like everybody else, and that "things which happened only to other people could in fact happen to [her]" (211). Whether writing about her condition would have helped her at the time when she was experiencing her mental problems is another question. I will suggest below that the textual strategy of incorporating and framing the disturbing element – here Didion's mental instability – functions only in connection with memory, which is malleable and can be adjusted to the narrative that the present writing self is planning to construct. This is why, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion successfully adjusts to her husband's death as she uses the text as a 'writing cure,'[10]

10 In *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing*, Suzette A. Henke suggests that autobiographical writing may function as a writing cure or scriptotherapy because it "could so effectively mimic the scene of psychoanalysis that life-writing might provide a therapeutic alternative for victims of severe anxiety and, more ser-

whereas in *Blue Nights*, she cannot effectively counter her ongoing fear of frailty and death – at least not by way of the same textual strategies she has employed before.

The importance of remembering in "The White Album" is underlined by the fact that Didion uses the phrases 'I remember' and 'I recall' sixteen times, drawing attention not only to the functions of memory but also to the way her text works rhetorically. The phrases are usually placed in sentence-initial position and occur in a series of anaphoric repetitions, by which Didion approaches her most problematic memories step by step and makes them appear in the right context in order to create an effect that will confirm her image as the 'moral voice' of the nation. An example is her description of the people's shocking (lack of) response to the brutal murdering of eight-months-pregnant actor Sharon Tate and four of her friends at Roman Polanski's house in Cielo Drive. Didion sets the scene by evoking the carefree, unreal life that she and her kin were apparently living, introducing it with the sentence "I recall a time when the dogs barked every night and the moon was always full" (208). The depiction includes herself "sitting in the shallow end of [her] sister-in-law's swimming pool in Beverly Hills" (208) when the first telephone calls with the reports of the murders came. These calls provided confused and contradictory information, the victims ranging from ten to twenty people, the perpetrators either drugged or hooded or black. Didion's narrative ends with the words: "I remember all of the day's misinformation very clearly, and I also remember this, and wish I did not: *I remember that no one was surprised*" (208, original italics). The juxtaposition of Didion's shallow, dreamy world with the brutal reality of the crime renders the fact that Didion and her friends were not surprised at the news and did not sufficiently care about it as morally problematic.[11] However, since Didion, at the moment of writing, testifies that precisely *this* part of her memories makes her feel uncomfortable, her authorial persona is confirmed as being morally sound (although the younger Didion she reports about may not have been). A. Robert Lee notes a similar effect in "The White Album." He observes that, although the attempt to bring narrative coherence into the incidents of the late 1960s "may ever prove elusive," Didion's "command of an operative viewpoint, eye and voice given to framing the issues in all their serial contrariety" is coherent throughout

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iously, of post-traumatic stress disorder" (xii–xiii).

11 Using juxtaposition to subtly comment on her otherwise neutral observations is one of Didion's main stylistic devices, as Jason Mosser argues in his analysis of *Miami* and *Salvador*: "Through her juxtaposition of opposing, sometimes contradictory, versions of events, Didion comments, directly and indirectly, on the ongoing historical narratives" (195–196).

the text (107). Lee concludes: "The tone remains calm, the assumption of viewpoint scrupulous – and quite the more so when Didion builds her own 'sure' admission of un-sureness as to overall signification of semiotics into that viewpoint" (107).

This coherence of the authorial persona, which is, according to Lee, characterized by calm and scrupulousness, is only possible because Didion writes from a temporally distant viewpoint, which results in an ironic distance between the present writing "I" and its former experiencing "I." As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain, autobiographical writing traditionally implies a splitting up of the personal pronoun "I" into the subject and the object of writing; the latter being the younger self, and the former the present writing self, which includes the assumption that the former inhabits a stable position in interpreting the latter (71). (Indeed, Smith and Watson propose to complicate this binary, adding two further aspects of the "I," to which I will come back later). This is precisely the structure Didion makes use of in "The White Album" when she assumes a more mature, even judging position with respect to her younger self. Being temporally removed from the mentally challenged Joan Didion of the late 1960s, she is able to provide a diagnosis of her illness in reaction to the events and incidents, and she does so with a clear-sightedness her psychiatrists and neurologists lacked. The fact that Didion thereby implicitly declares autobiographical writing to be superior to medical and psychological tools of diagnosis may be a side effect. What is certainly a main point of "The White Album," however, is the construction of a present "Didion" as a mentally stable and adept writer and interpreter of her own life story.

What adds decisively to this stable image of the authorial persona we are left with is the ending of "The White Album," which resembles the resolution of a typical coming-of-age story, with its overcoming of a difficult past and its promise of a prosperous future. Even though "The White Album" is an essay rather than a narrative (let alone a fictional novel),[12] its temporal set-up is similar to the macro-structure of a *Bildungsroman*, in which the past is presented as a series of social difficulties, which the protagonist has to master or leave behind in order to arrive at a more mature self. In "The White Album," the penultimate paragraph fulfills this function – for the "younger Didion" as well as for the cultural moment she mirrors:

12 The generic categorization of Didion's works is not always unambiguous as critical approaches to her oeuvre show. The *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of American Literature*, for instance, calls *The Year of Magical Thinking* a "long essay" (413), whereas other scholars treat it as a memoir (e. g. Bladek; Lockhurst).

> Many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment when word of the murders on Cielo Drive travelled like a brushfire through the community, and in a sense this is true. The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled. In another sense the Sixties did not truly end for me until January of 1971, when I left the house on Franklin Avenue and moved to a house on the sea. This particular house on the sea had itself been very much a part of the Sixties […] but after a while we did some construction, and between the power saws and the sea wind the place got exorcised. (212)

The above passage is telling in several respects. Firstly, the new house on the sea, read as a symbol, represents both Didion and her writing. Both needed "some construction" in order to become sane and whole. Through the active and purposeful construction of the text, Didion was "exorcised" and her mental problems were cast out. A second effect that the passage achieves is Didion's alignment with her contemporaries – everybody went back to normal after the "tension broke" with the Tate murders – which imitates the eventual integration of the protagonist of the *Bildungsroman* into the existing social structures. Moreover, since there is no reference to a future after 1971, readers are left with the impression that the state of both Didion and the society around her will remain stable, as both are doubtlessly relieved of their former 'madness.' The order is reestablished, implying the 'happily ever after' of a conventional narrative. In extension, not only is the "narrated I" cured of its mental disorder, but the present "narrating I" has also found its way back to the telling of a narrative. Even though Didion claims, in a last, additional paragraph of "The White Album," that she still does not know what certain episodes of her life mean (212), her text's structure suggests a profound trust in what she had declared to have lost: "the narrative's intelligibility" (186).

5.4 Recovering the Past: *The Year of Magical Thinking*

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion uses similar stylistic and textual strategies as in "The White Album," although the anterior reality she addresses is quite different. Luckhurst rightly observes that much of Didion's oeuvre is concerned with staging "the limits of meaningful interpretation" (99), and that *The Year of Magical Thinking* is "merely the latest in this sequence of memoirs and reports in this mode" (99–100). However, referring to "The White Album" as an example in this series, Luckhurst also recognizes that "Didion gained leverage on the Sixties generation because she was not of it," which "gives her […] the individualistic moral stance to critique conservatively what she regards as the

senselessness of the collective Sixties revolution" (100). In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, however, the death of her husband concerns her directly, which is a much more challenging point of departure.[13] This does not necessarily mean that *The Year of Magical Thinking* is more personal and closer to Didion's reality – or less artificial and 'literary,' for that matter. On the contrary, the text is, in Roiphe's words, "artful and elusive" with regard to Didion's experiences (102). *The Year of Magical Thinking* thus moves along the structures of a conventional literary (and therefore artificial) trauma narrative, which, on the one hand, perfectly suits the contemporary trend for public displays of 'trauma and recovery' (cf. Luckhurst 92), but, on the other, also caters to the desire of Didion's audience, who wishes to see her as an author who has perfect command over her life and writing.

John Gregory Dunne's death primarily turned into a traumatic event for Didion because she watched him collapse at the dinner table, unable to do anything to prevent it, which she perceived as a serious threat to her personal agency.[14] In addition, since the professional collaboration between Didion and her husband had been exceptionally close, Didion's identity as a writer was also profoundly challenged, as she was used to dealing with her experiences and to structuring her thoughts by way of her exchange with John. They used to read each other's writing and comment on each other's ideas, which amounted to countless interactions every single day (Rüeggemeier 189). As a result, John functioned as Didion's "relational counterpart, whose gaze she had internalized for the constitution of her self-perception" (190).[15] Thus, the shocking incident at the dinner table was a direct threat to Didion's identity as an autonomous agent as well as to herself as a writer. Indeed, numerous passages in *The Year of Magical Thinking* testify to Didion's awareness of her loss of agency and to her

13 Luckhurst's argument takes a different turn here, since he highlights that Didion's memoir of mourning in fact coincides with the boom in precisely such genres as thanatography and pathography, especially those written by celebrities (92 and 100).

14 According to McNally, deciding what kind of events or stressors one can consider traumatic is "fraught with complexities" (78). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) of the American Psychiatric Association takes into account both objective characteristics of the event and the victim's subjective evaluation and emotional reaction; consequently, they regard any event that threatens a subject's own life or physical integrity – *or* the life or physical integrity of another person – to be traumatic if it produces intense negative emotions, especially fear or helplessness (cf. McNally 79). Hence, witnessing a spouse's sudden death, as Didion did, clearly qualifies as a traumatic event.

15 My translation from German. The original sentence reads: "Als relationales Gegenüber fungierte John zudem als derjenige, dessen Blick Joan als konstituierend für ihr eigenes Selbstbild verinnerlicht hatte" (Rüeggemeier 190).

corresponding feeling of guilt, the conviction that she did not interfere early enough, that "she should have been able to save him" (22).

Within her conundrum of feelings, ranging from helplessness (10–11) and guilt (22) to self-pity (3), Didion seems, in a first phase, virtually unable to even name the fact and – as it were – pronounce John dead. On the opening pages of *The Year of Magical Thinking*," John's death is referred to only as "it" (3), or "the fact" (3), or "the event" (4), or "what had happened" (6). Didion's initial reluctance to describe John's death could well be interpreted as the inability to recount the traumatic event, since trauma apparently resists representation through language. Such an approach to trauma literature has not remained uncontested, however. As Pederson explains, criticism on trauma narratives was long dominated by the "first wave of literary trauma theorists," such as Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth (334), who, beginning to publish in the 1990s, based their research on clinical studies which held that the mind does not process traumatic experiences normally, and that many trauma victims are subject to amnesia (335). However, Richard McNally's groundbreaking study *Remembering Trauma* (2003) exposed traumatic amnesia to be "a myth" (Pederson 334). Consequently, as Pederson suggests, literary trauma theory should also revise its tenets and adapt to the current state of clinical research, focusing more closely on *the way* trauma is remembered and verbally rendered rather than insisting on the gaps created by the avoidance (or inability) to recount trauma (338–339). At this moment, however, the idea that trauma resists verbal representation provides a useful framework for the analysis of *The Year of Magical Thinking* because the work seems to have incorporated the tenets of the first-wave trauma theories and functions along their lines, particularly with regard to its generic structure.

In line with the traditional generic approach to trauma narratives, Leigh Gilmore writes on the connection between trauma and language:

> Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it. Indeed, the relation between trauma and representation, and especially language, is at the center of claims about trauma as a category. Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency. (6)

When Didion reduces the details of John's death to empty phrases, such as "the fact" or "what had happened," her text thus confirms the views of first-wave literary trauma theorists. Leigh goes on to argue that language is at the same time expected to be able to "heal the survivor of trauma" (6), if he / she finds a

way to articulate the traumatic moment. Indeed, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, with Didion's apparent hesitation to narrate the traumatic event, appears to be geared towards imitating the generic conventions of precisely this type of literary trauma narrative, a type that begins with the inability to verbalize "what had happened" and works its way towards the narrative integration of the stressor into the subject's lifeline. What exposes Didion's procedure as a literary pose (rather than a real difficulty or inability), however, is the fact that she "repeated the details of what happened to everyone who came to the house in those first weeks" (*The Year of Magical Thinking* 5), that is, she told the story of John's death many times – *months* before she even began to write the text. Her 'narrative recovery' in *The Year of Magical Thinking* is therefore a highly artificial one.

Nevertheless, *The Year of Magical Thinking* is revealing with regard to the strategies Didion employs to re-define her public image as a writer – her authorial persona – as a widowed author alias 'former wife of John Gregory Dunne.' And this public image does involve a neat narrative recovery; Didion's readership would expect nothing less from her. Mihaela Precup, who analyzed responses (e. g. reviews) to Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story,* finds that famous writers who publish accounts of their mourning are confronted with

> the paradoxical expectation that professional writers should not be too "eloquent" when it comes to grief, the proposal that no expression of grief should be acceptable if it does not mimic the rawness of fresh (not past or lingering) grief, and finally the expectation that these authors are responsible for adequately expressing and preferably amending the whole white Western culture of mourning. (193)

Precup's findings show that memoirs of mourning are a sensitive issue and subject to certain restrictions, especially with regard to "truth-telling," "sincerity of feeling," and "the appropriate duration" of the mourning period (197). For instance, the fact that Didion takes a full year to deal with her grief is deemed sufficient because it matches the cultural conventions, whereas Oates's decision to engage in a new relationship only six months after her husband died is harshly criticized by her readers (202). Moreover, these texts have to perform the balancing act between recording a private experience and simultaneously "propos[ing] it as a model" (102–103). Yet, what Didion does within this net of expectations and restrictions is not precisely to propose a new model of mourning. Rather, in order to secure the public's approval, she attaches her personal experiences to two easily recognizable preexisting models. The first one is her own, idiosyncratic way of dealing with personal problems through

writing – her well-known style –, which a substantial part of her readership is familiar with (for example from "The White Album"). The second one is the trauma narrative, with whose generic conventions Didion encodes her process of mourning, confirming the prevailing model of narrative recovery and thus providing her readers with a feeling of textual closure.

Suzette Henke identifies a "double entendre" in the term narrative recovery, and its ambiguity is certainly one of the driving forces of *The Year of Magical Thinking*. According to Henke, the concept is "meant to evoke both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of traumatically shattered subjects" (xxii). Didion tries to achieve both; she strives to find textual structures that should be capable of containing the narrative of John's death and simultaneously enable a connection between the event and herself, her search for meaning, and her mourning. In the course of this enterprise, she continuously asks herself whether she should have perceived the signs of John's illness earlier, when his death could still have been averted. As she remembers the days and weeks before the fateful evening, she re-interprets comments John made and the way he acted, for example the fact that he provided Didion with some of his notes for a book, which she retrospectively views as motivated by his knowledge that he would not live long enough to write the book himself (23). Didion thus constructs a narrative line in which John's death is a logical consequence of the previous events, something that she could have foreseen, had she read the signs and interpreted the narrative in progress correctly. Moreover, the narrative line that leads to John's death is supposed to counteract the sense of disorientation Didion experiences. Such a procedure is similar to what Henke describes as a still very common approach to autobiographical writing in general:

> To a large extent, every autobiography imposes narrative form on an otherwise formless and fragmented personal history [...] Despite the present poststructuralist moment in history, most contemporary autobiographers are engaged in fashioning coherent narratives of their own lives. (xiv–xv)

The notion of continuity in one's lifeline, which involves a beginning and an end, is, according to Henke, at the center of such writing: "the author recasts his or her life narrative in the shape of a salutary paradigm that offers both a myth of origins and an implicitly teleological model for future development" (xv).

Within these generic conventions and with regard to *The Year of Magical Thinking*, it is important to note that Didion pursues two separate goals: on the one hand, she writes her own memoir of grief, which takes as its beginning

John's death and as its end the overcoming of her period of mourning, that is, her "magical thinking"; on the other, she traces John's last days, writing his thanatography, which ends in his death. What connects both narratives is, obviously, the moment John's heart stopped beating. It is thus no coincidence that Didion's account becomes almost obsessed with determining the precise moment of John's death, directed by the need to understand "how and why and when it had happened" (*The Year of Magical Thinking* 22), as if this moment were the key to the construction of her narrative of recovery. For instance, Didion consults her apartment building's log to find out when the ambulance arrived and left again (19–20), and she agrees to John's body being submitted to an autopsy (21–22). This endeavor also gives her the possibility to find back into her routine as a writer and investigative journalist. Little by little, Didion returns to the tools she has always used for her writing, establishing connections to the past before 'the event,' although still being far from the continuity and healing effect which a successful trauma narrative should bring about.

This healing effect is only produced once Didion integrates John's death in the form of the autopsy report into the text and interprets it; yet, at the same time, the way in which the report is framed complicates the novel's interpretation to a great extent. John's autopsy report arrives almost a year after his death (*The Year of Magical Thinking* 199), and in what corresponds to a straightforward reading of the text, the report allows Didion to find closure because it confirms John's cause and time of death, showing that Didion could not have done anything to save him (201–203). Such a reading, however, only considers one of the different aspects of which the "I" consists, namely the "narrated I." As to the "narrating I," James Phelan points out that her commentaries on the autopsy report reveal what he calls "off-kilter" or "deficient" narration ("The Implied Author" 119), i. e. an unreliability of the "narrating I" that is not intended by the implied author (131). Phelan quotes the following passage from *The Year of Magical Thinking*:

> Only after I read the autopsy report did I begin to believe what I had been repeatedly told: nothing he or I had done or not done had either caused or could have prevented his death. […]
>
> Greater than 95 percent stenosis of both the left main and the left anterior descending arteries.
>
> Acute infarct in distribution of left anterior descending artery, the LAD.
>
> That was the scenario. The LAD got fixed in 1987 and it stayed fixed until everybody forgot about it and then it got unfixed. *We call it the widowmaker, pal*, the cardiologist had said in 1987. (206–207, original italics)

Phelan sees a contradiction in the passage, since "the realization that 'everybody forgot about it' should not lead either the [narrated-I], the narrating-I, or the implied Didion to the conclusion that there was nothing she or John could have done to have prevented his heart attack: they – and his cardiologists – could have continued to monitor his LAD" ("The Implied Author" 130). Phelan further argues that, in a fictional narrative, readers would be likely to conclude that the "narrating I's" fallacy is part of the purposeful design of the implied author, and the unreliability fully intended. In autobiography, however, implied author and "narrating I" are too closely linked to allow for such ironic distance (130–131). Phelan thus declares the narrative to be deficient, because even the implied author is unaware of her misreading of the autopsy report and her role in John's death.

While Phelan's analysis is compelling, and one can easily agree with his in-depth theoretical explanations of implied authors in fiction and autobiography, his final conclusion – that both the implied Didion and her "narrating I" support the "narrated I's" resolution that she is not to blame for John's death – is only one of several possible interpretations. Indeed, Phelan's conclusion is largely dependent on two factors: firstly, the excerpt he chose as the key passage and, secondly, his focus on the direct statements made by the "narrating I" rather than structural or stylistic characteristics. Furthermore, he assumes that the main goal of the novel is to achieve "some partial acceptance of John's death" ("The Implied Author" 131), which is not the only way to approach the text. One could therefore read the autopsy report and the way it is framed differently, suggesting that one should keep separated the aims of the "narrating I"/"narrated I" and what could be called the 'authorial persona.' Moreover, the decision to ascribe the text's overall design to an authorial persona rather than to the implied author adds an important aspect to the analysis: Didion's audience, who will respond to the work and draw direct connections between the authorial persona and Didion herself, and whose perception of the organizing entity behind the text is already conditioned by an image they have from Didion's earlier works.

As outlined previously, the success of Didion's trauma memoir arises from the fact that it fulfills the readership's expectations in two different ways: on the one hand, it supports the widely-held belief in the healing power of narrative, and, on the other, the text produces a strong, stable authorial persona, who is, moreover, familiar to the public because of her signature style. The first of these aspects is covered by the interplay between the "narrating I" and the "narrated I," who are initially divided by a temporal and ironic distance, because the "narrating I" exposes the "narrated I's" magical thinking as misguided. An example

is her refusal to give away John's shoes because "he would need shoes if he was to return" (37), which is obviously not possible. Moreover, the "narrated I" is declared to be "incapable of thinking rationally" throughout the winter, spring and summer after John's death (35), whereas the narrating voice makes perfect sense. As the "narrated I" progresses in her process of mourning and the first year after John's death comes to a close, however, the two entities begin to overlap "until, finally, they converge in their joint affirmation of John's lesson that 'you had to go with the change' (232)" (Phelan, "The Implied Author" 129). This eventual harmony of the two voices produces closure and leaves readers with the impression that Didion's narrative recovery was successful.

The second aspect, the production of a stable authorial persona, is achieved through stylistic means, and it simultaneously suggests the longed-for continuity after John's death. Like Phelan, I view the autopsy report and Didion's comments on it as the key passage, yet for other reasons than Phelan does. The autopsy report is embedded in a seven-paragraph section, whose most conspicuous features are its anaphoric repetitions. Didion lists all the evidence she has gathered about John's death (the apartment building's log, the documentation sheets of the emergency department, etc.), opening each of the seven paragraphs with the phrase "according to" (200–201). This is the core of the text, just as the psychiatric report was in "The White Album," and just like in the earlier text, the framing determines the effect. Before and after this seven-paragraph list of evidence, Didion inserts two sections. Whereas the pre-report section focuses on "cognitive deficits" (200) that Didion experiences, on her weaknesses and errors (for instance the fact that she wrote the wrong address on the form requesting the autopsy report), the post-report section presents an entirely different person, as if the mere insertion of the report had transformed her. In the section after the report, sentences and clauses begin with "I read," "I noticed," "I knew," and "I looked up" (202–203), generating an image of the analytically thinking author and investigative journalist that Didion's audience knows so well and thus establishing the sought-for continuity in her lifeline – not through the acceptance of death, but through the demonstration that her writerly power remains unbroken, and that *The Year of Magical Thinking* emanates from the same Didion as her earlier works.

The section after the autopsy report additionally reestablishes Didion's image as an autonomous agent, which further enhances the connection between *The Year of Magical Thinking* and the rest of Didion's oeuvre. Having been victimized through her witnessing of John's sudden death and been confronted with her own helplessness, she now rises above the traumatic event. As she states that John "had inherited a bad heart" and that it "would eventually kill him," Didion,

on the one hand, attests that she was not responsible for John's death in any way. More importantly, however, Didion poses as a judge who declares John's killer – his heart – to be guilty. She thus claims interpretive authority over her life and experiences. The similarity to "The White Album" and Didion's framing of her psychiatric report is conspicuous. As the destabilizing factor in her life – John's dead body – is firstly replaced with its textual equivalent – the autopsy report – and then incorporated into, or swallowed by, Didion's own text, she assumes control over John's dead body *and* over her writing.

The above analysis allows for a different view of what Phelan exposes as unreliability, i. e. the apparently illogical way in which the "narrating I" interprets the autopsy report and the "narrated I's" role in John's death. It may well be that both the "narrating I" and the "narrated I" misread the report, desperately trying to blot out any responsibility or failure to take John's medical problems more seriously. It may also be that there is no voice behind the text that has purposefully designed this fallacy and made it visible to the readership, such as a cognitively superior implied author. Yet, these potential shortcomings or deficiencies, as Phelan calls them, do not diminish the authorial persona's success in rising above the situation and gaining emotional and creative stability. In other words, if one focuses on the authorial persona rather than on the concept of an implied author, hierarchies become unimportant, since one can look at one entity in isolation from the others. Critics can move beyond Chatman's model of narrative communication, in which the narrator and the implied author are inextricably linked because the former is a direct product of the latter, and the latter functions as "the governing consciousness of the work as a whole, the source of the norms embodied in the work" (Rimmon-Kenan 87–88).

Rather, one could consider the authorial persona as performing a different and possibly independent function in the text, emphasizing the impossibility to reduce an autobiography to an orchestrated harmonious interplay of voices. As Shari Benstock writes, "[a]utobiography reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence between the manner and matter of its discourse" ("Authorizing" 11). For instance, on the final pages of *The Year of Magical Thinking*, the "narrating I" admits: "The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place. I look for resolution and find none" (225). This alleged lack of confidence of the "narrated I" is clearly at odds with the compelling stylistic performance of the authorial persona. Much like in "The White Album," the speaking voice(s) refuse(s) a resolution, but the stylistic organization of the text provides one. However, does this automatically imply unreliability and ironic distance between the two? Should readers consequently deduce that the "narrating I" just fails to recognize

that she has actually been cured of her magical thinking and that she can rely on a clear mind again? Or, if adopting Phelan's claim that, in nonfictional narrative, it is difficult to justify an ironic distance between the implied author and the "narrating I" and "narrated I" because "there is ontological continuity from one to the others" ("The Implied Author" 131), should one logically conclude that the authorial persona must also, somehow, show a lack of clarity and resolution? Obviously, both of the above suggestions make little sense.[16]

Micaela Maftei has a more persuasive explanation for such diverging voices in *The Year of Magical Thinking*; she writes that "time can split us into multiple selves, and [...] the distance between living an experience and writing about it can trouble any assumption of unity between the author and protagonist of autobiography" (76). She therefore proposes that "[l]anguage is not the means of unifying these two selves, but rather of showing them to each other (and to us). As such, perhaps the only way these selves can co-exist is through language" (77). In a similar fashion, Benstock argues that autobiographical writing shows the impossibility of selfhood and writing ever coming together and she sees the autobiographical project as "the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction" ("Authorizing" 11). Yet, despite its diverging voices, an elegantly crafted narrative such as Didion's may at least create an *illusion* of unity, and if this illusion is strong enough, it may even replace the author's image, in particular the one her readers perceive. In this sense, Paul de Man's suggestion that "the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine" the author's life because it "acquires a degree of referential productivity" (920–921) holds true – not necessarily for Didion, but certainly for her general audience. An additional factor that favors the sense of a unity can be found in what Smith and Watson, in their theory of autobiography, identify as the "ideological self." As an addition to the simple binary of the "narrated I" and the "narrating I," the "ideological I" comprises the historically rooted personal and cultural belief system (76). Although Smith and Watson point out that such belief systems are not necessarily stable, as "the possibilities for tension, adjustment, refixing, and unfixing are ever present" (77), *The Year of Magical Thinking*, with its strong endorsement of narrative recovery, makes for an ideological self with little shifts and tensions. The very belief in future betterment that permeates the entire text remains virtually unquestioned.

16 Phelan himself questions Chatman's model in a further article on *The Year of Magical Thinking*, titled "Voice, Tone, and the Rhetoric of Narrative Communication," suggesting an approach to narrative that relies more strongly on voice and tone. Indeed, the analysis he carries out resembles my own analytic focus on style.

Indeed, *The Year of Magical Thinking* is built on ideological premises that follow from Sartrean existentialist thinking, and the confirmation of these premises reverberates with the conviction that style equals identity. Sartre's famous statement that "existence precedes essence" (348) comprises the idea that identity is a cognitive achievement. Through the evaluation of our past experiences, actions, and decisions, we actively produce our essence – a procedure that lies at the basis of every autobiography and one that is already announced on the opening pages of *The Year of Magical Thinking*: "The way I write is who I am or have become" (7). The significance of this sentence goes beyond Maftei's interpretation that "Didion is not acknowledging a split here between the real world and the created world; she is speaking to their unity" (72). Primarily, Didion voices the belief in a fixed, stable self ("I am"), which emerges from past experience ("I have become"). The sentence – much like *The Year of Magical Thinking* as a whole – expresses the overwhelming urge to determine one's identity for good, to write down one's definitive self in order to know oneself. The textual illusion of self-knowledge is all the more powerful and referentially productive because Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, relies so strongly on her signature style, using it as an effective tool to gloss over the gaps between textuality and reality. In this sense, it is revealing that Didion's statement emphasizes stylistic performance rather than content ("the *way* I write" rather than "*what* I write").

Implicitly contained in the Sartrean existentialist view is the conviction that human identity 'happens' by way of accumulation of lived experience, or, by extension, of words and statements in a literary work, and this premise leaves no room for the possibility of a future marked by decline. Just as a work's meaning arises from the totality of the text, a human being's identity also emanates from the aggregation of its past life up to the present. Indeed, Didion's statement is preceded by references to her childhood and the affirmation that she "ha[s] been a writer [her] entire life" (7). The past is thus perceived as a constantly growing body of experiences and texts whose full meaning needs to be regularly reevaluated as new parts are added. Of course, every reevaluation is based on the principle of selection according to a "purpose, the informing principle that will give a shape to [one's] life story and govern the selection of material" (cf. Voss 219), and purposes may vary in each new attempt to define one's identity. Still, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, with its underlying assumption of growth and future improvement – Alyson Brickely calls it "a certain forward-facing spatial orientation" (152) and a move "toward a future that is con-

sistently imagined as better than what came before it" (151)[17] – does not encompass decline as a part, or an *inevitable* part, of human existence. Nor do the genres of the trauma narrative and the memoir of grief allow for a recording of age-related decline. Rather, they promote ideas of future healing and wholeness that are incompatible with the last stage of life.

In *Blue Nights*, therefore, when a new assessment of her existence is due, Didion will neither reproduce her customary emphasis on past experience nor rely so strongly on generic textuality. Calling into question her former stylistic patterns and her ideologies, she will seek out a different, more dynamic and fluid relationship between text and life – a text-life dialogue capable of containing her frailty, her fear, and a future that might not mend it all. The ageing author thus decides to make her last call in the form of a late-style narrative.

5.5 Rejecting the Past: *Blue Nights*

Whereas *The Year Of Magical Thinking* was an immediate success, and the critical community received it as a supreme addition to both Didion's oeuvre and to the body of trauma narratives and grief memoirs, *Blue Nights* met with less enthusiastic responses. One of the reasons for the mixed reactions was that, in terms of genre, *Blue Nights* is not as easily classifiable as its predecessor. Joan Didion biographer Tracy Daugherty summarizes the generic difficulties as follows:

> [*Blue Nights*] was hardly [about losing a daughter, as its publisher announced]. It was an impressionistic collage of isolated memories, slant observations, lists of objects, and riffs on rhythm. […] The book went from being a meditation on parenting to a love song for Quintana to a lengthy complaint about ageing and mortality. It ended up as none of these, quite. (580)

Daugherty's accurate assessment is descriptive and neutral in tone; other critics, in contrast, were more explicit in their disappointment at a work that was obviously different from what and how Didion had written before. Roiphe, for instance, complains that *Blue Nights* does not provide any direct insights into the relationship Didion had with her daughter and husband "even though that would ostensibly be [its] subject" according to the publisher's advertisement

17 Brickley bases her interpretation on a work by Davis Wills titled *Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and Politics*.

(102). Even stronger are the words Rachel Cusk uses in *The Guardian*'s review of *Blue Nights*:

> [*Blue Nights*] is in a sense the manifestation of [Didion's own increasing physical and emotional] fragility, the dwindling and fading of the artist's ability to create order out of the randomness and chaos of experience. Didion's portion of this chaos has been cruelly and unjustly large: it comes as no surprise that in the end, she should not be able to digest it all. (par. 8)

Visible in this passage is what has been argued at the beginning of this chapter: audiences are likely to make a direct connection between the ageing author's physical decline and her creative ability.

Moreover, the age-bias also affects the critics' responses with regard to the generic interpretation of *Blue Nights*. Both Roiphe and Cusk seem to have a clear idea of what a memoir should or should not do. From Roiphe's point of view, it should be "intimate" and "straightforward" with regard to personal relationships (102), and for Cusk, the memoirist's task is "to create order out of the randomness and chaos of experience" (par. 8). Hence, as soon as the author diverges from a clearly marked generic pattern, this is interpreted negatively as the "dwindling and fading of the artist's ability" (Cusk par. 8) rather than positively as a bold creative experiment. Interestingly, both critics are unable to move beyond an understanding of *Blue Nights* as a memoir of grief in response to Quintana's death. They consequently disregard the fact that Didion mainly writes about her experience of ageing and frailty, and they do not recognize her focus on late style. If they address this topic at all, it is by dismissing it as "a strong streak of narcissism on which the reader […] was called to exercise forgiveness," and "[t]he glamourizing of her own experience, what might be called the sin of self-importance" (Cusk par. 4).

The moralizing tone of such responses, which seems inappropriate within a scholarly discourse, indicates how disruptive *Blue Nights* is both in its content and form. If one takes into consideration that Didion has always written mainly about herself, one may find it surprising that critics, all at once, find fault with her apparent narcissism. Why should she now, in her old age, refrain from putting herself in the limelight? Or, from a slightly different perspective: why should the experience of old age be less worthy of exposure to the public than – say – those of struggling with mental illness, as in "The White Album," or losing one's spouse, as in *The Year of Magical Thinking*? Obviously, *Blue Nights* presents readers and critics with a challenge they did not expect. Not only is the text's emphasis on frailty and decline at odds with the image of the strong and stable authorial persona that readers are used to from Didion's former writing, but the

work's generic hybridity also disrupts our understanding of autobiographical writing. There is no clear progression from a problematic past towards a brighter future, at least not in a temporal sense. The admission in the end that "[t]he fear is not for what is lost" but "for what is still to be lost" (188), moreover, subverts our Western perception of growing older as a process of maturing and old age as culmination and the rounding off of one's life cycle. Finally, the fact that Didion's traumatic experience of losing her daughter is not properly narratively 'recovered' – nor does Didion herself, within the textual space of *Blue Nights*, 'recover' in any way – undermines the generic precepts of the trauma narrative, of which *Blue Nights* presumably makes use.

Indeed, most of the questions that arise from these challenges can be productively dealt with by considering *Blue Nights* as a late-style narrative instead of reading it as a trauma memoir, and once one stops assessing the text through the lens of conventional autobiography, one gains access to additional interpretational spaces. This is not to say that *Blue Nights* is not 'about' traumatic experiences or not autobiographical at all, but deciding to focus one's reading on aspects of late style rather than trauma and recovery, or even 'narrative identity' in a general sense, leads to a different appreciation of Didion's choice of content, stylistic means, and structural and generic tools. Such a reorientation is not simply a critical choice amongst many others, but one that is directly motivated by the text itself. Although *Blue Nights* reproduces Joan Didion's daughter's illness and untimely death as well as Didion's role as a mother in the early years of Quintana's childhood, the retrieval of these past events through memory – which amounts to the selective narrativization of life experience at the core of any autobiographical project – is only initiated in order be rejected as insufficient, pointless, or even detrimental: "In fact, I no longer value this kind of memento. I no longer want reminders of what was, what got broken, what got wasted" (44), Didion decides after having pondered about souvenirs from Quintana's childhood. And, at a later stage: "Memories are what you no longer want to remember" (64).

Didion's refusal to remember, to engage in her past, leaves her fully concerned with her present circumstances, that is, her failing health and her resulting fear of frailty, mental decay, and death – a subject matter that forces an ideological shift upon the whole text. Already in the second chapter, Didion's musings about losing a child turn into a listing of her own and her husband's illnesses and ailments at the time of Quintana's wedding in 2003 (13–14). Reporting an episode of gastrointestinal bleeding that forced her to spend several nights at the ICU, without its cause being determined, she closes the account with the commentary that "[m]edicine, I had reason since to notice more than once, remains

an imperfect art" (15). What seems, at first sight, to be a simple disappointment that her medical problem was not solved, in fact refers to a belief system with which *Blue Nights* is deeply imbued, and which runs counter to the ideology represented in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. On the one hand, medical science, whose purpose is to heal, to cure, to rid a human being of illness, is no longer a guiding aspect in the last phase of life, which naturally and inevitably leads to death. More importantly, however, Didion's choice of the verb in the phrase "*remains* an imperfect art" expresses her disbelief in the Western cultural narrative of progress, which is commonly applied to both scientific development and the life course of a human being. Not least, the phrase "imperfect art" arguably suggests that there is another kind of art, a "perfect art," one that is able to identify causes of ailments, draw persuasive conclusions, and suggest further steps to take: her own late-style narrative.

5.6 Facing the Truth of Old Age

When I insist that Didion does not, in *Blue Nights*, narrativize her past as in *The Year of Magical Thinking* but instead addresses her present, it is, firstly, for the reason that only this recognition can account for the structural characteristics of the text. Indeed, Didion herself – that is, the persona she presents us with in *Blue Nights* – is initially unaware of the fact that addressing the past will not do anymore. Significantly, it is through a *formal and stylistic* inadequacy that she realizes the need to break with her former approach. Contemplating her earlier life in Los Angeles and comparing it with her present in New York, she comments: "Time passes. Memory fades, memory adjusts, memory conforms to what we think we remember" (13). What this comment reproduces is nothing less than the narrative method she employed in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. As time passes and past events become blurry, control over the subject's past threatens to be lost. It must be actively retrieved and adjusted up to the point where a new, neat narrative emerges. The result is a harmonious overlap of the imagined past self (the "narrated I") with the present needs (the "narrating I"). In other words, narrative recovery at its best. However, this method is no longer functional in *Blue Nights*. The phrase "time passes" intrudes upon the text two more times, forcing the narrator to reconsider her approach to her past as well as her former style.

> *Time passes.*
> Yes, agreed, a banality, of course time passes.
> Then why do I say it, why have I already said it more than once?

> Have I been saying it the same way I say I have lived most of my life in California?
> Have I been saying it without hearing what I say?
> Could it be that I heard it more this way: *Time passes, but not so aggressively that anyone notices*? Or even: *Time passes, but not for me*?
> […]
> *Time passes.*
> Could it be that I never believed it?
> Did I believe the blue nights could last forever? (16–17, original italics)

The second time the phrase appears, Didion is visibly annoyed with her own repeated utterance, even though anaphoric repetition used to be the most idiosyncratic feature of her signature style. She aggressively replies "Yes, agreed, a banality, of course time passes" to the repetition of the phrase, and thus engages in a dialogic relationship with her former stylistic self, evoking her past persona only in order to dissociate herself from her. This effect is augmented through the italicization of the utterances that are in line with her former persona. Contrary to Didion's initial intention to seek a continuous narration from past to present, the above passage suggests a clean break with the past.

Indeed, a traditional continuous past-to-present narrative, more than just being inadequate in view of the problems at hand, aggravates the elderly autobiographical narrator's situation because it suggests a temporal progression that will, sooner or later, lead to the author's death. In traditional life writing with a young or middle-aged protagonist – be it fictional or autobiographical, a *Bildungsroman* or a trauma narrative – narrative progression commonly coincides with personal progress and betterment. In old age, however, there is ever less to expect from the passing of time. The popular wisdom that time heals all wounds may still apply, but the rate at which new wounds are received increases rapidly. Relatives and friends die – Didion's numerous references to fatal illnesses, accidents, and obituaries offer ample testimony to this – health problems become more frequent, and one's resilience diminishes. To foreground the passing of time may not be the most promising strategy in view of what the future has to offer. As a matter of fact, very early on in *Blue Nights*, Didion recognizes that "your awareness of this passing time – this permanent slowing, this vanishing resilience – multiplies, metastasizes, becomes your very life" (17). Narrative progression, which is indispensable for, and automatically results from, any autobiographical project with a focus on past experience, must thus be avoided, and Didion partly succeeds in doing so through her refusal to cherish her memories, her abandonment of the narrative of recovery, and particularly through her trenchant rejection of her former authorial persona.

As Didion declares her alienation from her former style and her previous structural and generic method, she simultaneously creates a new authorial persona, one who is most strongly characterized by her repeated questioning of her previous stylistic preferences. In other words, the newly emerging persona that Didion employs has 'late style' written all over her textual façade. Such an aesthetic reorientation is no trivial matter if one considers that Didion's aesthetics, particularly her salient "use of repetition-with-a-difference" (Phelan, "Voice" 57), which already features in her earliest writing, was so closely linked with the author herself. Critics even created the adjective "Didionesque," and a whole generation of younger writers, especially women, declared that they had developed their own writing skills under the influence of Didion's signature style.[18] Didion's rejection of her previous style thus comes close to a public offense, an act of rebellion, threatening to shatter her loyal reading community's faith in their own taste (an effect that would very well explain the above-mentioned mixed reactions to *Blue Nights*). With reference to the image Didion creates of herself, one can thus discern a central dilemma: at the same time as she takes leave of her former strong, stylized authorial persona, presenting herself as more personal, honest and consequentially also more vulnerable, she risks falling out of favor with her audience. On the one hand, this dilemma further underscores the precarious situation of the ageing author; on the other, however, it shows that the necessity of stylistic development in old age seems so urgent that such risks must be taken.

The urgency of ageing authors to reinvent themselves by changing their former aesthetics and furnishing their texts with a sense of late style may well happen, as suggested in Chapter 2, due to their awareness of the late-style debate in theory and criticism. However, as becomes visible in Didion's autobiographical writing, one could also approach late style as an attempt to get rid of former authorial poses and pretentions in order to be perceived by the audience as being as 'real' as possible. Didion's last two works illustrate this shift in an impressive way. What critics may condemn as narcissism in *Blue Nights* (cf. Cusk

18 The novelist, essayist, and journalist Meghan Daum, for instance, describes Didion's influence on her writing as follows: "I first read Joan Didion in my early 20s, and that totally changed everything. I realize what an obvious example this is. A young female essayist saying they're influenced by Joan Didion is like a young female singer-songwriter saying they're influenced by Joni Mitchell. It's something that got in my ear. The way Joan Didion wrote was the equivalent to Joni Mitchell's alternate tunings. I thought, 'Whoa! You can do that? That's allowed?' That was my feeling in first reading Didion. So that was a revelation. I was interested in the way that she allowed herself and was allowed to put sentences together in a particular way and let her logic take her in a particular direction" (Yaffe).

par. 4), that is, Didion's extensive questioning of her own writing procedure and her overt admission that she finds it difficult to "*address the subject as it were*" (116, original italics), in fact moves Didion, the real author (or her "historical I," to use Smith and Watson's term [72]), closer to her audience because it foregrounds the writing process rather than the finalized product. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, on the first few pages, Didion pretended to be unable to name the traumatic event, her husband's death. As argued above, this was an authorial pretense rather than a genuine inability on Didion's part, and it was owed to the generic requirements of the narrative of recovery. The image of Didion created through such a pose is that of an author who has made the conscious and controlled decision to artfully modify her experience of grief when turning it into text, suggesting that the textual product is the result of an elaborate, probably prolonged process of reflection. In *Blue Nights*, in turn, accessing the traumatic subject, old age and its fears, is a process that extends over the whole text, and Didion's reflections on the process itself seem to be happening at the same time as she is writing. This provides her readership with a much more direct and honest view of what is going on in her mind, whereas in former works, the reflective process with its possible temporary fallacies and failures was withheld from the public's eye. Of course, Didion's disclosure of her writing process in *Blue Nights* could be as elaborate a pretense as her 'inability' to name John's death in *The Year of Magical Thinking*. One could see it as the pose of the 'late stylist.' Still, Didion's less than direct, even erratic way of reaching self-knowledge makes her much more human, as it destabilizes the image of the artist as a master of her craft.

If one takes a closer look at *Blue Nights* and the way in which Didion documents her writing process, one finds that the natural order with regard to reflective observation and textual product seems to be reversed: Didion often first reports an experience and then asks herself why she told it or what her own words meant, only reaching a satisfactory conclusion at a much later stage. For instance, she mentions an incident when she was afraid to get up from her chair after a music performance:

> As I sit on the folding metal chair I begin to fear getting up. As the finale approaches, I experience outright panic. What if my feet no longer move? What if my muscles lock? […] What if I stand up from this folding chair in this rehearsal room on West Forty-second street and collapse, fall to the floor, the folding metal chair collapsing with me?
>
> Or what if––
>
> (Another series of dire possibilities occurs to me, this series even more alarming than the last––)

> What if the damage extends beyond the physical?
> What if the problem is now cognitive?
> […]
> What if I can never again locate the words that work? (110–111)

By way of piling question upon question, Didion attempts to reach self-knowledge and arrive at an explanation of her fear. If she here comes to the conclusion that she is frightened at the prospect of losing her cognitive faculties and, along with them, her ability to write, this resolution is only provisional. A few pages later, she again probes into the incident: "When I tell you that I am afraid to get up from a folding chair in a rehearsal room on West Forty-second Street, of what am I really afraid?" (117). Finally, Didion recognizes that the experience at the rehearsal room was so upsetting because her fear of frailty in old age is coupled with a death wish: "*Let me just be in the ground and go to sleep.* When I tell you that I am afraid to get up from a folding chair in a rehearsal room on West Forty-second Street, is this what I am actually saying? Does it frighten me?" (133, original italics). Only by systematically questioning and disputing her former knowledge is Didion able to reach her innermost feelings, and one can very well imagine that also this last explanation of her fear is just a temporary one, since she retains the stylistic tool of the list of questions and refrains from making any affirmative statements.

This is not to say that *Blue Nights* lacks moments of clarity; it does feature passages with Didion's well-known, secure grasp of stylistic means. For instance, readers get a glimpse of her former persona when Didion recounts that she began to write those pages "believ[ing] their subject to be children" but then realized that their "actual subject was not children after all, at least not children *per se*, at least not children *qua* children: [that] their actual subject was this refusal even to engage in such contemplation, this failure to confront the certainties of aging, illness, death" (53–54). Didion seems to have recovered her former security as the narrator concludes: "Only as the pages progressed further did I understand that the two subjects [i.e. children and the refusal to face one's frailty] were the same" (54). Yet, whenever the familiar style shines through, a closer look reveals that Didion, rather than dealing with her present fears, is writing about a past that she has already assessed, accepted, and transformed into text-bound knowledge. Moreover, in the above quotation, Didion constructs her *refusal* to think about illness and death rather than address her frailty, and she achieves her goal by cleverly combining this refusal with the topic of children, who are the promise of life and a well-established literary symbol for continuity after death. Thus, what Didion does in this rare moment of clarity is to gloss over her present insecurity by way of a textually firm structure. In other

words, she falls for the illusion of the conventional autobiographical narration, in which the reflection on the past irrevocably leads to an (apparent) understanding of the present.

In the dissimilar bulk of *Blue Nights*, Didion successfully resists such illusory deception by avoiding a uniform narrative and constantly shifting between past and present narration and metatextual comments. Her refusal to commit herself to definitive statements, the provisional nature of her opinions, and the sheer number of questions – some of them genuine, some rhetorical – not only foreground the *process* of gaining knowledge rather than its product, but they also allow for a fast reaction to her ever-changing life circumstances. "Emergency" (185) is the word and the concept Didion uses to denote her state, in which nothing lasts long, and illness "overtakes us when we can imagine no reason to expect it" (173), and Didion's emergency of old age is best contained within the "intensive care unit" of the late-style narrative. It is strangely symbolic that Didion's narration in *Blue Nights* returns again and again to the ICUs where Quintana spent weeks and months, and which were unable to provide satisfactory services – "medicine […] remains an imperfect art" (15). Neither can Didion's narrative technique truly provide recovery, since old age is not a state that one can recover from. It is a state of "no longer" and "never again," the ICU in which one – just like Quintana – dies rather than recovers, where one will "never again wear the red suede sandals with the four-inch heels, never again wear the gold-hoop earrings, the enameled beads, never now wear the dress Sophia Loren is wearing" (184).

However, with its maximum flexibility and its absence of protocol, Didion's late style embodies true old age creativity: a creativity driven not by the desire for the timeless and eternal beauty of art, but by the simple need to persist while life still lasts and to walk all the way to its end. Although the late-style narrative cannot mend Didion's frailty and fear, it can accompany her on this path. Rather than being a tool to fix a problem, it makes the problem visible and allows Didion to recognize her enemy. "Think it over," she tells herself in one of the many moments of reconsideration:

> Think it over. I do not even want to consider "in case of emergency."
> Emergency, I continue to believe, is what happens to someone else.
> I say that I continue to believe this even as I know that I do not.
> I mean, think back: […] Might not waking up in a pool of blood on my own bedroom floor qualify as an "emergency"?
> All right. Accepted. "In case of emergency" could apply. (185–186)

Instead of lulling herself into an illusion of safety aided by watertight stylistic constructs – a safety she initially confirms in writing even as she knows that it is not true – Didion breaks up her own textual structure and faces her reality, her frailty, and her fear. The conclusion of the text confirms her newly-gained ability to resist the desire for illusory narrative recovery: "I know what it is I am now experiencing. I know what the frailty is, I know what the fear is. The fear is not for what is lost. […] The fear is for what is still to be lost" (188). Didion finally turns her back to her past and bravely confronts her bleak future.

With her emphasis on continuing loss rather than recovery, Didion produces a text that mirrors her view of old age and seems to confirm the cultural 'narrative of decline.' In *Blue Nights*, decline happens on several levels. Most notable is Didion's physical deterioration; however, the text's structure also suggests decline. Instead of narrative progression, readers encounter a form of regression and dissolution when Didion invalidates so many of her thoughts right after stating them. Furthermore, instead of recording past experience through her autobiography, Didion rejects her memories. In *Blue Nights*, old age is a descent towards death – and death is implicitly defined as the final and absolute loss of everything that life once was: health, experience, memory.[19] In a more radical sense, one could even read *Blue Nights* as an attempt to unwrite and invalidate Didion's former oeuvre, as a refusal to believe in the traditional narrative of literature's transcendence and continuation after death. As contained in the Latin phrase "*stilum vertere*," to turn one's style (Pettersson), which referred to the practice of turning the *stilus* in order to erase what one had written on one's wax tablet (Matz 2), Didion *turns* her style – turns it into a *late style* – and thus erases her former identity.

Following this line of thought, it would be tempting to conclude that *Blue Nights* – as Rachel Cusk would have it – also records the decline of Didion's ability to write. Yet, this is too narrow an approach and would not do justice to the work. On the other hand, neither does it seem fitting to state that *Blue Nights* represents the idea of artistic culmination and mastery that many late-style theories propagate (cf. Hutcheon and Hutcheon, "Historicizing" 52). Since it is not the finalized work of art, the artistic *product*, that is placed at the center of

19 It should be noted that this view of old age and death runs counter to the contemporary tendency to provide old age with value and thus counteract ageism, a movement that is especially strong in the USA (cf. Woodward, "Performing Age" 164 and "Age-Work" 780; Segal 45–46). On the one hand, it is unsurprising that a traditionalist like Didion remains within a slightly outdated concept of ageing. From a different point of view, one could argue that her particular experience simply confirmed the traditional 'peak and decline' model. After all, *Blue Nights* records her personal experience of ageing; she is not directly proposing a universal model.

Blue Nights but the artistic *process* leading to it, late style can no longer be a question of quality in the sense of the 'late genius or artistic decline' debate. Artistic processes are not subject to qualitative assessments in the same way in which finalized works of art are. Moreover, the fluid authorial persona that results from Didion's flexible narrative eludes any qualitative judgment. Her lateness does not consist of 'a' style, but of a strategy that aims at – or at least results in – the deconstruction of the concept of a clearly marked personal style in writing. In *Blue Nights*, Didion, the writer who used to be the epitome of stylistic authorial identity and had over many years built a solid reputation as a masterful writer, finally 'gets real' and shows herself in an immediate, direct way. Using Smith and Watson's terminology, one could say that in *Blue Nights*, readers do get a glimpse of the "historical I" (72) of the author. Interestingly, as the image of the real *author* emerges – with all its contradictory characteristics and erratic behavior – the concept of the *artist* dissolves, and as it vanishes, so does the idea of the artist's stylistic identity. Therefore, if *Blue Nights* can in any way be considered a narrative of decline in regard to artistry, then it is because the death of the artist is necessary for the author to be born.

Seeing the historical author's face, however, comes at a price. If Didion's lateness uncovers something for us, it is the fact that the greater the stylistic stability and the more uniform the authorial persona, the more artificial and less lifelike the text. This artificiality is removed in the late-style narrative. As Spitzer suggests, following Adorno, lateness "can only be pinned down" as "a 'stepping back from appearance,' or retreat from 'harmony'" (63). It "critiques […] the semblance (*Schein*) of aesthetic unity, of 'harmony'" (63, original italics). A large part of Didion's audience may not have been aware of the extent to which Didion's signature style functioned as a mask and they may feel cheated when she takes down this mask. This is a risk that she must have been willing to take, because her gain is greater than her loss, and so is ours, ultimately. We are given a manual of ageing that is much more realistic than Didion's former manual of grief. In order to use it, however, we would have to embrace Didion's radical honesty and sense of reality and face our own narrative of decline, and whether we are willing to do so, is another question. As Sven Birkerts has put it, "[W]e may all hope to get to old age, but slowly, with leisured circumspection, and few of us are in a great hurry to study the brochures" (1).

6 Conclusions: Late-Life Creativity Revisited

> [T]he more we advance in our understanding of late style, […] the greater our sense of bad faith with regard to its aesthetic and ideological over-simplification. […] this bad faith becomes good practice wherever the easy equation of lateness and greatness is resisted, wherever the slow, suspicious work of criticism contrives to counteract the all-too-human desire for a happy ending.
>
> (Hutchinson, Afterword 1)

6.1 The Critic as Skeptic

The present study was begun some years before *Late Style and Its Discontents* was published but it could just as well have been designed as a response to Ben Hutchinson's Afterword. The assessment of the late works by John Barth, Karen Blixen, and Joan Didion was, indeed, 'slow, suspicious work.' It was guided by a modern critical skepticism that advocates "distance, doubt and detachment" as well as a "distrust [of] universals" (Mousley 4). Firstly, I was skeptical about literary gerontology's goal to find "knowledges" about old age in literary works (Falcus 58) – especially if it should support the concept of positive, productive, and successful ageing. This aim seemed so clearly at odds with the pervasive negativity inscribed in late literary works. Charnley affirms that, in literature, "ageing is rarely, if ever, seen as having any potentially positive aspects: age means loss of physical and mental faculties, the fading of beauty, an increasing dependency" (122). My own aim was a different one: rather than simply affirming the positive sides of ageing, I wanted to investigate in what ways this negativity functioned as a literary tool.

Secondly, my distrust was directed towards the universals of late-style theory. What appeared to be more problematic than the 'lateness-is-greatness' hypothesis which Hutchinson rejects (Afterword 1) was late-style theory's focus on achievement. Late works by contemporary ageing authors have gone through the lengthy processes of the publishing industry; hence, they were selected be-

cause they *are* considered to be of high artistic quality. The "equation of lateness and greatness" (1) may thus be appropriate. The idea of achievement, however, adds a different shade to the concept of late-life creativity; its economic overtones link it to the paradigm of productivity. Yet, it is questionable whether one should use productivity as a principle against which to gauge stylistic change in old age (or 'successful ageing' for that matter).

Finally, in the analysis of the literary texts themselves, suspicion was raised by the conventions of literary criticism to silence the author. It seemed that since its introduction, the notion of the 'death of the author' had mutated from a charming enabler of interpretive multiplicity to a dogmatic dictator striving for exclusion rather than plurality. One victim of this exclusion had been the study of literary creativity; I realized that it was impossible to investigate creative processes in a sensible way without making reference to the author. Nevertheless, it was my aim to stay true to the rules and conventions of textual analysis. Hence, I had to develop and define methods for investigating the author's *inscription* in the text.

The image of the late artist, as it emerges out of late-style narratives, is the product of several social and scholarly creativity discourses, and its 'greatness' must be critically examined. In the popular opinion, "great writers are 'great' on account of their eloquent encapsulation of durable truths" (Mousley 1), and this view has stubbornly persisted in literary criticism, despite "the combined forces of scepticism, historicism and specialization" (1). Andy Mousley calls this traditional reading of texts the "'sage discourse' within literary criticism," and 'sage critics' operate on the basis that "great books 'matter' because they have the capacity to guide and nurture" (1). These critics are essentially *humanists* (3). In ageing studies, many scholars who explore literature (i. e. cultural gerontologists and literary gerontologists) combine humanism with the "all-too human desire for a happy ending" (Hutchinson, Afterword 1), the wish for a serene old age. This desire (which, rather than being personal, may be part of a professional or a political agenda) may influence their work to the extent that literary texts *not* conforming to their program are actively rejected. Time and again, in articles and at conferences, one encounters ageing studies scholars who quote Philip Roth's infamous statement "[o]ld age isn't a battle; old age is a massacre" (*Everyman* 156) – determined to prove the opposite.[1] It

1 See, for instance, Vetterli, who states that, according to statistics, the age group of seventy-year-old people are the happiest, which, for him, is proof that Roth's statement "does not reflect the feeling of well-being of the majority of the elderly" (n. pag.). Yet, Roth's Everyman is certainly not a figure that stands for the age group of healthy and happy seventy-year-old seniors; in line with the pattern of its hypotext, the

may be a coincidence that Roth's nameless protagonist, the one who utters the notorious statement, is an elderly artist himself; yet, it seems that late art and ageing artists – real and fictional ones – have become a site of dispute where much larger cultural affairs are reflected and negotiated. These affairs shall here be outlined.

6.2 Concepts of Late-Life Creativity and Their Social Implications

As Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles suggest, "the question of late style matters a very great deal. It is paradigmatic (perhaps synecdochic would be better) of the larger issues that confront us all the time when considering the nature of creativity" (Introduction 11). Indeed, creativity is not exclusively linked to art. According to Carolyn Adams-Price, it "can have a number of different forms" and involves multidimensional "acts of self-expression which employ multiple cognitive and affective processes in the generation and translation of ideas into products" ("Aging" 272). In German criticism, therefore, artistic and non-artistic creativity in old age are regularly brought together and compared with each other (e. g. Kalbermatten 47; Kunz 88; Verres 121; Zimmermann 105–106). This may partly be motivated by the fact that the pair of terms *Alterskunst* and *Lebenskunst* (old-age art and savoir vivre / *ars vivendi*), are linguistically similar and thus suggestive of a conceptual overlap. However, can artistic creativity studies be used to explore general everyday creativity? Moreover, can the literary texts themselves support their readers' ageing processes? May "the elders portrayed serve as guides to readers navigating through middle and old age" (Waxman 11)? Ralph Kunz considers it questionable whether one can *learn* how to age creatively from consuming late art (100–101). He criticizes the current trend to utilize successful artists as examples to cultivate an ideal image of creative and productive ageing (100): these artists, he argues, are more talented and better trained than non-artists, and a comparison is therefore inappropriate (88). Kunz further believes that only a few people achieve *ars senescendi* – the art of living a successful and fulfilling life in old age (88; 100). Late works can thus

medieval morality play *Everyman*, Roth's nameless protagonist exemplifies a universal experience of dying (cf. Heller-Andrist 183–208). Hence, the statement that old age resembles "a massacre" refers to the fact that the battle against death cannot be won; everybody will eventually undergo the experience of dying. From this point of view, what Roth's novel does is to relieve the elderly of the pressure of 'successful ageing' and the demand to strive for health and eternal youth.

only be used to gain insight into the ageing processes of the artists themselves (101).

Recent research into various types of late-life creativity shows a different perspective, however. A study conducted with elderly readers, *Lesen im dritten Lebensalter* (reading in old age), evaluated the meaning-making processes that individuals set in motion when reading narrative fiction (cf. Ramm). It was found that guided reading does, indeed, induce the conscious and active shaping of readers' own identities: the participants recognized the processes depicted in the novels as underlying structures of identity-shaping processes, connected these processes with late-life creativity concepts, and subsequently engaged in hermeneutic reflection (Ramm 281). The consumption of art can thus trigger creative assimilation processes. What can also have a notable influence on people in the last phase of life is the *practice* of non-professional art, for example painting and music, especially in settings such as nursing homes, hospitals, and hospices (Verres 123–124). The ability to use art to express diffuse fears and turn them into graspable objects is thus not only reserved to a few creative geniuses. Rolf Verres argues that, firstly, the practice of art may positively influence the philosophy and work ethics of the whole institution within which it takes place (123). Secondly, individuals who practice art ideally recognize that they can turn their own lives into a work of art (124). Hence, they learn to look at their lives with a spirit of artistic inquiry and become active in *staging* their lives (125). Artistic practice shall thus function as a training ground for elderly people to acquire the skill of *ars senescendi*.

The individual is thus forced into action in order to come to terms with old age, illness, and death. This emphasis on activity is a positive sign as long as it is aimed at strengthening agency in old age. However, its downside is that, along with agency, *responsibility* is also shifted towards the individual. In 2011, Huber et al., in the *British Medical Journal*, put forward a proposal to change the WHO definition of health and shift its focus from "complete wellbeing" to "the ability to adapt and self manage in the face of social, physical, and emotional challenges" (1). Such a definition allows us to draw many formerly excluded groups (e. g. disabled people, but also the elderly) into the realm of the healthy. Yet, "adapt" and "self manage" contain a dangerous potential for social-Darwinist thought, further suggesting that health can be achieved by an autonomous effort of the mind, by the sheer exercise of free will. Hence, the flip side of the coin is that illness and decline are implicitly defined as a lack of effort to "adapt and self manage," which, in the worst case, presents illness as one's

own fault.[2] If the active and creative shaping of artistic products (or the active shaping of one's life) is taken as a measure for successful ageing, those elderly people with a more passive stance towards ageing are likely to be judged as unsuccessful. Moreover, even the 'great masters' themselves may not feel capable of actively producing creative work in old age anymore. In a recent interview, eighty-four-year-old Philip Roth, who had retired from writing in 2010, declared that he was "no longer in possession of the mental vitality or the verbal energy or the physical fitness needed to mount and sustain a large creative attack of any duration on a complex structure as demanding as a novel." Therefore, "[r]eading ha[d] taken the place of writing, and [now] constitute[d] the major part, the stimulus, of [his] thinking life" (McGrath). This move from an active to a more passive engagement with life, *from creative production to creative reception*, should be respected as a *right* of the elderly.

However, reading itself, even though it involves creative thought processes (Ramm 281), is rarely considered a creative or even artistic activity, since it does not yield a visible creative product. For creativity, whether artistic or not, is also linked to productivity (cf. Lindauer 237). According to Amir Cohen-Shalev and Tamar Rapoport, to be creative means not only "to produce many novel and varied responses" but also to create "a final product that is widely recognized as a significant contribution in its field" (79). In connection with old age, Todd I. Lubart and Robert J. Sternberg report that productivity "in both artistic and scientific fields and across different cultures" peaks around the age of forty and then decreases "until productivity is half of its peak rate" (22).[3] The peak-and-decline model of a human life span (Smiles 17), as it is implemented by various contemporary scholars who write about late-life creativity (e. g. Lindauer), has thus undergone a development: whereas, in the nineteenth century, in line with Romantic notions of the artist, it described a supposed *ability*, and in the early twentieth century, under the influence of Theodor W. Adorno's writing, it foregrounded the *quality* of the artist's work, it is currently used to refer to patterns of *productivity* – the quantitative *result* of creativity. If critics assess the creative works of authors and other artists – especially if this happens in the context of cultural gerontology – they comment implicitly (if not overtly)

2 A similar position with regard to Huber et al. was taken in a former publication, "Ageing, Agency, and Autobiography: Challenging Ricoeur's Concept of Narrative Identity" (Rivera Godoy-Benesch 107–108).

3 Interesting, in this regard, is the fact that a single, outdated quantitative study by Harvey C. Lehman, *Age and Achievement* (1953), is still being used by many scholars in the field of artistic creativity (e. g. Cohen-Shalev, Lubart and Sternberg, and Rösler et al.), even though the study contains major flaws in data collection and interpretation, as Martin S. Lindauer convincingly exposes (242–254).

on the abilities and capacities of aged people in general. Thus, if they combine a creativity / productivity discourse with the peak-and-decline model, it is only a small step to declaring that old age is an unproductive phase in general, a phase of stasis and thus – in today's economic value system – a phase characterized by lack of social worth.

The discussion of old-age art is thus infiltrated by an economic discourse that is omnipresent in contemporary Western society, and which has resulted in a social and political paranoia: the elderly are accused of being a threat to a thriving economy, causing costs and refusing to contribute to the community (Zimmermann 102–104; Reddemann, Kindermann, and Leve 47–48). Within this hostile environment, policy makers urge elderly people to show more responsibility towards society (e.g. by doing unpaid community work). Moreover, the elderly are admonished to refrain from using state and community resources; rather, they must *adapt* to their contingencies on their own, using their own creative potential. Ageing studies scholars who emphasize activity and productivity in old age are often – and unknowingly – complicit in these dynamics. Their aim to combat ageism by arguing that old age is *not* marked by decline has a downside, as Harm-Peer Zimmermann convincingly exposes: it promotes a value system that is bound to the youth discourse and which cannot do justice to the idiosyncrasies of old age (110). Moreover, as the elderly are expected to react independently and flexibly to their changing life circumstances (their own illnesses, but also a changing social and economic environment), they are controlled by exterior factors and constantly forced to adapt to the predominant youth culture. This prevents them from using their resources for developing an inner "coolness," an acceptance of old age (111).

One can thus see that both late-style theory's focus on *achievement* and the adaptability discourse's emphasis on *activity* are problematic: as the image of decline is countered, old age (not the elderly themselves, but old age as a concept) is stripped of its quality of slowing down and thus its right to take leave of the high-performance society and move forward towards an acceptance of death. Helen Small, in her discussion of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* and Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal*, follows the philosopher Bernard Williams in arguing that "ageing and decline [are] necessities which assist our ability to think of death as tolerable, and, in doing so, enable our lives to retain meaning for us, and ourselves to remain recognizable as *ourselves*" (214, original italics). According to Thomas Rentsch, this is the natural process of "psychological ageing" (199) that every individual undergoes. Remaining recognizable to themselves in old age (Small 214), however, involves an inevitable alienation of the elderly people from (youthful) society: as they grow older and older, they have ever

fewer communication partners with the same set of experiences (Rentsch 201). For a human being, whose identity is primarily constituted through interaction with others, this is a particularly incisive development (200). Ageing thus means "becoming oneself" but also "separation from society and alienation from the outer world" (201).[4] This supposedly natural process of growing old is a philosophical ideal, however. Within society's youth culture, the elderly are often forced to cling to a passing youth and thus alienated *from themselves*.

Susan Sontag perceives this problem as even stronger with regard to women. In her essay "The Double Standard of Ageing," she argues that women begin to suffer from society's expectation to stay young already in their thirties. They thus have to constantly deny their real age and their real identity. She concludes by asserting that "[w]omen have another option […] They can *let themselves age naturally and without embarrassment*, actively protesting and disobeying the conventions" (768, italics added). Interesting, in this context, is Sontag's phrasing: "*let* themselves age" (768, italics added) suggests a natural (and even passive) process to which one should submit instead of developing an activism aimed at suppressing it. Further, Sontag's feminist concern can be usefully adapted to a contemporary anti-ageist agenda, and her opposition between men and women can be extended to the duality youth / old age. Hence, just as women may "allow their faces to show the lives they have lived" and "tell the truth" (768), elderly people may speak for themselves, without relation to youth and youth culture. The acceptance of – even emphasis on – decline is thus not necessarily ageist.

The gender question in old age has further aspects that are related to activity, creativity, and productivity. Kathleen Woodward explains:

> For women, the cultural dichotomy of youth and old age has long been underwritten by the biological dividing line between the reproductive and post-reproductive years, with the symbolic date of older age for women understood as coinciding with menopause around the age of 50. ("Performing Age" 168)

Hence, the phase past menopause is *naturally* characterized by the impossibility to reproduce, and thus *culturally* endowed with the lack of productive energy. This is certainly one of the reasons why it is more difficult for women past fifty to pursue a successful (i. e. productive) career, especially in businesses where their bodies are in the spotlight (e. g. television and film). Hence, a factual, visible

4 My own translation from German. The original sentence reads: "Insofern erscheint das Werden zu sich selbst auch als Vereinzelung und geht mit einem Fremdwerden in der Welt einher" (Rentsch 201).

loss of biological productivity – a physical change that could be viewed as age-related decline – is extended to the societally important, but less easily visible, domain of social and economic worth.

More important for a discussion of old-age art, however, is the blurring of biological reproduction and artistic production, which is primarily present in male creativity discourses. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar show in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, many writers have used the concept of 'literary paternity,' allegorizing the process of artistic creation as the fathering of 'mental offspring.' Prominent among those writers is Gerard Manley Hopkins, who believes that "[m]ale sexuality […] is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis" (Gilbert and Gubar 4). The concept of 'literary paternity' is an effort on behalf of male writers to define creative writing "as a mirror held up to nature, the mimetic aesthetic that […] implies that the poet, like a lesser God, has made or engendered an alternative, mirror-universe" (5), and this effort is aimed at compensating for the fact that men have little control over their biological reproduction. "A man cannot verify his fatherhood by either sense or reason," Gilbert and Gubar state; "that his child is his is […] a tale he tells himself to explain the infant's existence" (5). The compensatory narrative of aesthetic, creative production, which "begins with Aristotle and descends through Sidney, Shakespeare, and Johnson" (5), has a long tradition and is deeply engrained within the cultural concept of creativity.

With regard to creativity in old age, one could say that being artistically productive in late life, because of its reproductive overtones, is even more strongly connoted with a transcending of the temporality of the human condition – however, this benefit is not extended to women. For men, far into old age, biological reproduction is possible; for women, in contrast, it is considered to be an impossibility and therefore simply unnatural. Woodward, in "Performing Age, Performing Gender," shows that the idea of "a pregnant woman beyond menopause" is still unacceptable, despite the fact that recent advances in medical science have made it possible (168). (For men, in contrast, using medication to treat erectile dysfunction is much less problematic in social terms). "[T]he very association of fertility with an older female body is absurd, a cultural contradiction in terms," Woodward writes (168). Because of the blurring of the reproductive and the artistic discourses, elderly women who are creatively productive may be suspicious. Yet, conflating reproductive capability and creative capacity is a patriarchal concept, aimed at "the reassurances of male superiority that patriarchal misogyny implies" (Gilbert and Gubar 5); it is therefore no surprise

that female artists are not the ones who benefit from it. On the basis of a cultural image of post-menopausal barrenness, they are likely to be denied artistic transcendence in old age.[5]

It may seem strange that the various feminist movements of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries have not yet successfully counteracted such patriarchal or even misogynist stereotypes of creative production. One of the reasons is that second-wave feminism was itself an *ageist* movement, mainly propelled by "young women, determined to reject the lives of their mothers" (Segal 14). According to Julia Twigg, moreover, feminist theory as well as ageing studies are marked by a profound lack of interest in the female ageing body (60), which could be a further reason for the fact that late female art has largely remained unexplored.[6] Twigg remarks:

> Social Gerontology, particularly in its more radical or humanistic versions, has struggled to assert the social rather than the physiological basis for understanding old age, against a culture in which biomedical accounts occupy a privileged and dominant position. (60)

Social aspects of ageing, however, are intrinsically connected with the ageing body (59; Rentsch 200). For this reason, they cannot be comprehended without taking into account physicality and sexuality – and neither can the concepts of late-life creativity be usefully explained without reference to the physical body and its cultural image. In other words, the gender-biases within ageing studies and late-style theory (Hutchinson, Afterword 238; McMullan 17), in combination with a certain gerontophobia in feminist studies (Segal 14), have prevented a thorough investigation of female late-life creativity. This gap could then easily be filled with traditional patriarchal stereotypes.

Hence, concepts of late-life creativity, whether male or female, are determined by an amalgam of biological, social, economic, and philosophical factors, and late-style theory has been influenced by them, as well as taken an active part in shaping and promoting them. Meanwhile, artistic creativity has remained a fuzzy concept, one that is difficult to describe and even more difficult to measure (which may be a further reason why more easily graspable production discourses, such as those of biological fertility or economic productivity, have been

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5 Psychoanalytical discourses, especially Freudian ones, have been complicit in viewing older women as static and devoid of creative potential, as Woodward convincingly exposes in *Aging and Its Discontents* (193; cf. also McMullan 19).

6 The primary reason for the exclusion of women from concepts of lateness is, according to McMullan, that "they have no place (or at best a highly circumscribed place) in the larger concept – genius – of which late style is a sub-category" (17).

used). Despite the uncertainties involved, however, the idea of late-life creativity continues to be an indispensable tool of meaning-making – in the arts, in music, and in literature, as well as in the lives of elderly non-artists.

6.3 Towards an Ethical Practice of Literary Analysis

The questions that remain to be answered are, firstly, what role late-style narratives occupy in the dynamics outlined above, and, secondly, what function literary analysis may perform in the broader field of ageing studies. It has been noted that studies of late style in literature, notably in Anglophone and German criticism, have experienced a considerable boom within the last few years.[7] This correlates with the increasing number of literary works about old age, which may itself be a result of the current demographic changes, that is, the growing old of the baby boomers (Falcus 53). Many of these works foreground the function of late-life creativity (cf. Chapter 2). Given the recency of the phenomenon, however, it is risky to make predictions about its effects. Nevertheless, a few possibilities shall here be sketched.

Firstly, late-style narratives in literature do provide profound insights into creative processes, as the analyses of John Barth's *The Development*, Karen Blixen's "Echoes," and Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* have shown. According to Carolyn Adams-Price, such literary instances of creativity "may help psychologists improve their understanding of creativity" ("Aging" 270). This may be true with regard to the general insight that age(ing) is not a neutral ground for creativity. As Rentsch suggests, "the ageing process is a radicalization of a human being's life circumstances"; more specifically, old age is "the phase in which the temporality of human existence is most radically experienced (197–198).[8] Ageing thus involves a heightened consciousness of one's life as *conditio humana*, which, besides the temporality of one's existence, involves one's physical frailty, one's social embeddedness and dependence, as well as one's identity as

7 Recent studies include Stuart Taberner's *Aging and Old-Age Style in Günter Grass, Ruth Klüger, Christa Wolf, and Martin Walser: The Mannerism of a Late Period* (2013); Yoshiki Tajiri's "Beyond the Literary Theme Park: J. M. Coetzee's Late Style in *The Childhood of Jesus*" (2017); Shannon Blake Skelton's *The Late Work of Sam Shepard* (2016); Steven Matthews's "Beckett's Late Style" (2009); Malte Kleinwort's *Der späte Kafka. Spätstil als Stilsuspension* (2013); Bethan Jones's *The Last Poems of D. H. Lawrence: Shaping a Late Style* (2010); and Ailsa Cox's "'Age Could Be Her Ally': Late Style in Alice Munro's *Too Much Happiness*" (2013).

8 My own translation from German. The original passage reads: "Der Prozess des Alterns […] ist die Radikalisierung der menschlichen Lebenssituation" (Rentsch 198).

a thinking subject. If creative processes are a fundamental part of one's identity – and for professional artists, they usually are – the literary text is likely to be affected by this heightened awareness. Late-style narratives do not directly reflect their authors' *ageing*, however; rather, what is observable within the space of the text is the renegotiation of the relationship between author and work. The *nature* of these new, late life / art constellations is highly individual, however, and so are the processes leading to them.

In John Barth's short story cycle *The Development*, old-age authorship consists of a closer connection between biographical and textual reality than those life / art relationships pursued in earlier, youthful artist narratives. Art is no longer an autonomous space; it is intrinsically connected with the artist's life, and it has a clear function: by controlling his protagonists and ironically distancing himself from them, Barth affirms his superiority as well as his creative ability. Hence, art in late Barth becomes a tool to constantly reestablish and confirm the author's identity as an artist. Yet, the audience is a concern, too: Barth must make himself visible in his textual product, which is why his protagonist, George Newett, is fashioned after the author. The affirmation of control in old age is thus a strategy aimed at gaining (or maintaining) public recognition rather than a merely internal, personal process. It is closer to social ageing than to psychological ageing (cf. Rentsch).

Karen Blixen's endeavor in her late short story "Echoes" shows similarities as well as differences with regard to Barth's lateness. In "Echoes," Blixen modifies her former short story "The Dreamers" and thus disturbs its closure; the autonomous space of the artistic product is thus disrupted. The autobiographical protagonist, Pellegrina Leoni, moreover, takes a more radically feminist stance towards the production of art, revising the former text's theory of creativity and thus emphasizing that creative processes are age-bound. More importantly, however, Blixen breaks with the concept of closure itself: since the two stories' factual details refuse to match, the texts enter a continuing dialogue, a negotiation of meaning between the past and the present, and this process takes place in historical reality rather than in the fictional space of the narratives themselves. Hence, Blixen's lateness suggests that in old age, the closure of an artistic work is no longer an ideal to be embraced and striven for. In extension, life itself, or the life of the artist, cannot be viewed as achieving transcendence and coming to a peaceful close. On the contrary: life must constantly be reevaluated, and meaning must constantly be searched for. Blixen's lateness thus foregrounds activity, but it also asserts that activity and creativity will never lead to a final truth.

Probably the most interesting results are produced by the analysis of Joan Didion's autobiographical text *Blue Nights*. Didion, having maintained a fairly similar style during her entire career, performs an explicit break with her past stylistic identity. In *Blue Nights*, the iconic author not only questions her former style, she also refuses to look back on her life and dwell in memories. Her ageing is marked by frailty and decline, and her writing mirrors this, pursuing a constant 'unwriting' of recently reached conclusions, until there is little left – apart from unanswerable questions and "[t]he fear […] for what is still to be lost" (Didion, *Blue Nights* 188). Hence, the creative product cannot act as a cushioning device for the impact of old age's contingencies. Rather, it is the *creative practice* that functions as a routine to which one can hold on in old age. Didion's late style thus rejects the idea of art as transformative, transcendent, or even beautiful. Art is taken down from its pedestal, and the artist is no longer a creative genius. Instead, she becomes a mortal, common individual, plagued by age and illness much like everybody else.

What can we deduce from these late-style narratives, and what do they tell us (if they do so at all) about late-life creativity in general? One conclusion is readily apparent: creativity is an individual process but one that happens within, and is shaped and influenced by, a web of social parameters. One of these parameters is *society's view* of old age itself, and the role creativity is assigned within this view. As shown above, society favors a view of old age creativity as an *active engagement* with one's life and uses this as a positive counter-image of *production* to a feared and disdained view of *stasis* in old age. Ageing authors who publish late works provide such positive counter-images and thus confirm and support the common striving for active ageing. They promote the image of an elderly artist sitting as his or her desk in intellectual labor and industriousness and writing book after book after book. Yet, there is a twist: in line with many other literary portrayals of ageing, the texts themselves, in their fictional or autobiographical spaces, actually convey images of decline and decay. Thus, readers are constantly torn between the principle of creative production (the work itself) and the image of deterioration (old age *within* the text).

Due to the ambiguous messages of such works, readers must use their own creative thought processes in interpreting the texts; yet, this type of active engagement is entirely personal and not to be compared to the old-age activism Zimmermann warns against (110–111). It is not aimed at conforming to social expectations, unless the reading takes place within a social setting, such as a reading circle. From this it follows that reading is a *solitary but active* engagement with one's life through the consumption of art. According to Rentsch, solitariness is an unavoidable characteristic of old age, but dealing with it is also

one of the most demanding existential challenges a human being has to face (201). Reading can serve as an aid in this struggle and is, moreover, an activity that is largely undisturbed by social stereotypes and expectations. Zimmermann argues that elderly people, in order to actively shape their ageing processes, need "cultural resources" such as "role models, thought patterns, and established practices" (106).[9] Late-style narratives, as well as other texts about old age, are such cultural resources. Hence, elderly readers are provided a tool to come to terms with *their own inner reality* of ageing, decline, and eventually death. Late-style narratives thus perform a double function, and both of its aspects resist traditional ideas of creativity: on the one hand, these texts define and develop concepts of late-life creativity, providing artistic counter-versions to the views of late-style theory; on the other, they offer a space for practicing an *individualized* creativity that is no longer determined by social values.

Not all of the principles favored by society are rejected, however: personal agency is a value that is emphatically affirmed in late-style narratives. Although its goal is essentially self-determination, agency depends on recognition from one's environment. To formulate it differently: agency only becomes an issue if it is *not* recognized by one's environment. The ageing artists portrayed in this study all make a point of showing their (artistic) agency and foreground their liberty to choose or change their style. From this, one must conclude that they feel that their agency as artists is under threat. As authors age, there seems to be an increasing discrepancy between the reception of their work and what they actually mean to communicate. On the one hand, the deeply entrenched peak-and-decline model could cause the devaluation of their work; on the other, late-style theory's preference for "[f]ragmentation by design, incompleteness, internal contradiction and emotional ambivalence" (Cohen-Shalev, "Self and Style" 297) might lead to a filtered reception and thus a selective reading of their texts. This expected lack of proper recognition by ageing artists' audiences – popular and scholarly ones – can pose a threat to writers' artistic identity. What aggravates the problem, of course, is literary criticism's convention of silencing the author.

From this point of view, a literary criticism that takes into account the author's own view as inscribed in the text (rather than a critical practice aiming at a multiplicity of distinct interpretive possibilities) not only affirms the individual

9 My own translation from German. The original sentence reads: "Diese Möglichkeit, sein Leben kontrolliert und willentlich zu gestalten, hängt allerdings eng mit kollektiven Vorbildern, Denkmustern und Praxisformen zusammen. Das sind diejenigen Ressourcen, die eine Kultur für die Bemeisterung des Alters bereithält" (Zimmermann 106).

artist's agency but also constitutes an *ethical practice*. It proposes a treatment of elderly persons that respects their dignity. It may be little more than a curious fact that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is conceptualized as 'coming of age,' involving the attainment of socially recognized agency and self-determination. 'Coming of *old* age,' in contrast, seems to be linked to a loss of such agency in the eyes of society (especially when symptoms of dementia are involved).[10] Moreover, a young person who has come of age is given responsibility. In old age, this responsibility is reduced to blame for the high costs of social security and healthcare, as well as for the current economic and ecological problems, which the baby boomers have arguably caused (the latter reproach is especially strong in the USA). If studies in literary gerontology take the author's view into account, however, they create a positive view of responsibility: artists are considered to be the source of the messages they communicate and thus responsible for them. In other words, an author-centered literary criticism is tightly bound to an *ethics of communication* that locates reason, responsibility, and agency within the sending subject. Defining late-life creativity and following Joan M. Erikson, Adams-Price emphasizes that late literature consists of "the creation of meaning" ("Aging" 271). If critics disconnect this meaning from the author who has produced it, they dissolve, or at least undermine, the reason and agency of the writing subject.

Hence, the choice of methodologies in literary criticism should not only be subordinated to the field's research aims (i. e. the reaching of insights into a text) but also take into account the *ethical effect of the critical practice itself*. In contrast to the natural sciences, where research ethics is a major concern (e. g. with regard to test persons and animals), in art criticism, scholars are largely unaware of the ethical aspects of their practices, since their object of investigation, the product of (supposedly) autonomous art, is not directly influenced by their methods; it cannot be damaged, at least not in the same manner as animals or people may be. The idea of the 'death of the author,' by further separating the artwork from any human subject, has conveniently contributed to this neglect of ethical concerns.[11] The idea that the very methodology of the critical practice

10 See also Stephen G. Post's concept of 'hypercognitivism,' which denotes society's preference for mental faculties and rational thinking, due to which people with fewer mental capacities (e. g. patients suffering from dementia) are considered to have no proper personhood and thus no agency (231).

11 The only ethical discussion in art criticism revolves around the question as to whether one should consider the ethical effect of art itself. As Ella Peek outlines, there are two positions involved, autonomism and ethicism, whereby ethicism emphasizes "the possibility of certain narrative artworks having the potential to play an important role in moral education" (n. pag.).

may implicitly support or suppress certain values has not been a topic of discussion. And yet, the ethical effects of art criticism are readily apparent in the field of late style. The assessment of late works is always bound to a philosophy of the human life cycle. More often than not, however, and arguably due to the complexity of the concepts of late-life creativity and their social implications, critics are unaware that they cultivate a certain image of old age. In the worst case, they unknowingly promote the erasure of the creative subject who has produced the work. Evidently, Adorno's view on late style has fostered this trend, since it propagates that the artist's subjectivity "takes leave of the works themselves" ("Late Style" 366). If no organizing subjectivity is involved in the work's production, however, the agency of the artist is expunged.

Rentsch is right to point out that the agency- and reason-centered philosophical approaches of modernity cannot fully accommodate the particularities of the ageing subject, since they operate in accordance with Kant's Categorical Imperative and thus presuppose an abstracted, universal being (189). Rather, one should resort to ancient Greek philosophy with its focus on each individual human being's happiness (189). This allows for an *ethics of the phases of the human life cycle* (190). Yet, how would such an ethics of old age find its way into the contemporary society? It seems clear that the Categorical Imperative, "an objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we must always follow despite any natural desires or inclinations we may have to the contrary" (Johnson and Cureton n. pag.), cannot account for different, age-dependent *rationalities* (in the plural). However, it is equally evident that elderly people (and we are here talking about the fourth age, not the active, third age [cf. Lloyd 261; Twigg 64]) are underrepresented in those groups who define society's principles of rationality. Politicians, policy makers, businesspeople, and academics will hardly devise a 'rationality of old age' before they have reached the fourth age themselves. Hence, if different ethical principles are defined for different population groups – and it is not the groups themselves who are in charge of constituting them – this is a risky enterprise: it might open the floodgates to discrimination and further ageism. Late-style theory has arguably brought forth such a discriminatory practice,[12] and textual criticism has contributed its share. Currently, issues of old age and ageing are rapidly gaining importance in society, politics, and scholarship. Literary criticism could seize this opportunity to revisit its methodologies and extend them in order to include a non-ageist consideration of late-life creativity.

12 See also McMullan with regard to the gender bias in late-style theory, which is yet another example of criticism's discriminatory practice: "Gender offers the most obvious immediate critical blind spot in studies of late style" (17).

Similar movements in literary criticism happened in the past in relation to gender, class, race, and sexual orientation (among others) and have resulted in firmly established interpretive categories with their own theoretical schools. Yet, with regard to old age as a category, a word of caution is necessary, especially for literary gerontologists. It is true that "we should listen to elderly people – they have something important to share" (Rentsch 206);[13] it is equally evident that late works offer "vital knowledges about ageing" and that "[l]iterary gerontologists are in the privileged position of unearthing and bringing to light these knowledges" (Falcus 58). However, these works are influenced by a particular tradition of late style, one that favors fragmentariness, contradiction, and resistance to closure, and one that promotes an image of the aged artist as an eccentric and a genius. Hence, late art (and specifically late-style narratives) may not be the most reliable source to extract old-age universals. What this study has attempted to do, by contrast, is to investigate the conditions under which ageing authors write, the way in which they are exposed to social and scholarly influences, and the interests and values that are at stake in their artistic practice. In doing so, it has created an ethical, non-ageist methodology of textual analysis, one that can be adopted and further adapted. This methodology includes a specific model of artistic communication and, in turn, promotes a specific view of elderly people: one that considers them to be capable, sagacious, and responsible agents – within their own lives and within society.

13 My own translation from German. The original sentence reads: "Hören wir also den alten Menschen zu – sie haben etwas sehr Wichtiges mitzuteilen" (Rentsch 106).

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Index

This study examines how selected authors of the late 20th and early 21st centuries write about their creative processes in old age and thus purposefully produce a late style of their own. Late-life creativity has not always been viewed favourably. Prevalent "peak-and-decline" models suggest that artists, as they grow old, cease to produce high-quality work. Aiming to counter such ageist discourses, the present study proposes a new ethics of reading literary texts by elderly authors. For this purpose, it develops a methodology that consolidates textual analysis with cultural gerontology.

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