COUNTER-TEXT

It's odd, but even when I am in pain I have a sexual urge. Perhaps especially when I am in pain. Or I should say that I am more attracted, more fascinated by women who cause me pain?

Probably you could call it the masochistic tendency. I don't think I've always had it—it's something I've developed in my old age. . . .

I crouched over just as I had on the twenty-eighth of July, glued my lips to the same place on her calf, and slowly savored her flesh with my tongue. It tasted like a real kiss. My mouth kept slipping lower and lower, down toward her heel. To my surprise she didn't say a word. She let me do as I pleased. My tongue came to her instep, then to the tip of her big toe. Kneeling, I crammed her first three toes into my mouth. I pressed my lips to the wet sole of her foot, a foot that seemed as alluringly expressive as a face.

"That's enough."

Suddenly the shower came on; water streamed over my head, face, that lovely foot. . . .

—Seventy-seven-year-old Utsugi with his daughter-in-law Satsuko, *from* Jurichiro Tanizaki, *Diary of a Mad Old Man* 26, 66

3. **The Mirror Stage of Old Age . . .**
Marcel Proust's *The Past Recaptured*

AFTER SPENDING SOME YEARS in a sanatarium outside Paris, Marcel returns to the city to attend a reception at the home of the wealthy Guermantes. He is, we remember, a neurasthenic dandy recognized in elite circles for his literary gifts—although he has in fact published only a few sketches. The memorable psychological drama that takes place that afternoon in the closing pages of Proust's *The Past Recaptured* can be read as a frightening hyperparable of aging in the twentieth-century West. Like other more familiar psychological dramas of initiation (the witnessing of the primal scene, for example, or the celebrated Greek drama which gave Freud inspiration for his theory of the Oedipus complex), it is structured as a scene of recognition, followed by blindness—or repression. But unlike classical psychoanalytic dramas, this drama of aging and its discontents turns more importantly on the character's relation to future time than it does to past time.

Marcel's insight into his future is doubled over into two paradoxical and contradictory scenarios about what he can achieve in terms of work. On the one hand, the man who is tormented by doubts about his own talent and disillusioned about the institution of literature itself finds that his faith in both himself and literature is restored on the afternoon of what he calls the most beautiful day of his life. On the other hand, as he is confronted face to face with his advancing age, he is assailed by new doubts and despairs that he will ever finish the very work he has now resolved to complete. Long wishing to begin in earnest his

literary career, Marcel finally feels ready to do so. But the fact of his age (he is around fifty and has always been sickly) depresses him, and he quite understandably worries that he may die before he finishes his work. Is it or is it not too late? Marcel's rendezvous with what he understands to be his destiny at the reception is a contradictory combination of hell and paradise, danger and pleasure. It is a *combination*, never perfect union, because Marcel himself is split in terms of his relation to time. The ecstatic psychic moments of what he calls perfect knowledge—of the past recaptured, of indeed *youth*—connect his past with his present, giving him a sense of a productive future. His new and grim knowledge of old age, however, threatens to separate him from that ideal union of past and present, projecting him into a future aborted by age.

As with the narrative of Oedipus, the moment of recognition of his own aging is preceded by a series of delays which can be understood as forms of unconscious denial. I will mention two only. I take the following incident as my first example of Marcel's unconscious denial of old age. Lingering on his way to the Guermantes' so as to postpone his arrival (this dallying is certainly not only for the sake of making a fashionable entrance), Marcel notices an old man "with staring eyes and bent shoulders [who] was sitting, or, rather, was placed and was making greater effort to sit up straight, like a child who has been told to behave properly."[1]

By comparing Marcel's reaction to this man with the way he responds soon after to the elderly guests at the Guermantes', we can gauge the degree to which he is as yet unable to see into the mirror of his own future. The narrative of this small scene condenses the narrative of the scene at the reception: lack of recognition is followed by shock of recognition. The old man whom Marcel at first takes to be just any old man suddenly assumes an identity in Marcel's eyes. He is revealed to be a longtime and once "important" acquaintance, the Baron Monsieur de Charlus. But this scene differs importantly from the one to be played later that afternoon. In a very real sense this scene involves only two characters—the nameless old man and Monsieur de Charlus. Marcel stands to the side. He does not implicate himself in this scene. Later that day he will be forced to participate when the drama assumes the proportions of a doubled double, a triangle in which Marcel oscillates between two positions depending upon whether he contrasts himself with the others or finds himself reflected in their eyes. This structural variance between the two scenes is clearly revealed in the difference between Marcel's rhetoric about old age here and his rhetoric later at the Guermantes'. Here he is too far removed from what he will later understand as the realities of his *own* old age to correctly interpret the painful nature of the old man's condition. Here Marcel remains clinically detached, fascinated to detail the physical characteristics of the frail Monsieur de Charlus (who has suffered a stroke) and almost eager to record the evidence of his loss

of social status. Even more telling, Marcel sentimentalizes the old man's physical infirmities, musing, for example, that he preferred to see in his limited gestures "an almost physical gentleness, a sort of detachment from the realities of life" (183). Later Marcel will find himself repelled by old age—because he is dangerously close to it—and will resort to satire.

The space of the final pages of *The Past Recaptured* can be thought of as divided into two domains—the private and the public. They are related to each other complexly and correspond to Marcel's ambivalent relation to his new sense of the future. It is in solitude when he is isolated from others that his belief in literature is renewed and that he "recaptures" the past, experiencing precisely (or so he believes) what he had felt at certain precious moments long ago. For Marcel, this form of doubling is elating. It unites the past and the present by insisting on their sameness, their identity. During these brief moments which are occasioned by involuntary memory (they cannot be willed into being), time as change, as limit, and as death is banished. Marcel feels himself a "timeless person, consequently unconcerned with the vicissitudes of the future" (197). Or, we might say, at these moments he feels himself to be *ageless*.

Marcel associates the private with what is authentic and is located deep within his sense of himself. Thus theoretically at least, for him the most valuable literary work would represent that experience, and the most contemptible would be concerned with the *appearance* of things. Literature is furthest from "reality," he believes, when it merely gives "a miserable listing of lines and surfaces" (213). It is ironic of course that one of Marcel's greatest talents is for satire, for the parodic description of the appearance of things. He exercises his talent for the "listing of lines and surfaces" when he crosses the divide between the private and public, stepping from the solitude of the small library where he has been waiting for the concert to end and into the main drawing room. Marcel's entrance into the social world is preceded—or rather further *delayed* (this is my second example of unconscious denial)—by a long and eloquent meditation on art and literature. It is immediately followed by the most trenchant and sustained satirical description of the elderly in western literature. Proust's metaphor of the theater is perfect, for it is in the very nature of the theater to question what is real and what is appearance. Marcel is *dis*oriented.

Marcel's first impression on entering the drawing room (he calls it a *coup de théâtre*) is that he has unaccountably found himself in an oddly unsavory masquerade ball. He thinks the guests are bizarrely costumed and are all playing pathetic roles. He wonders if they have purposely made themselves up into old people. He peers into their faces, trying to see back into time in order to discover their identity by reconstructing in reverse their "successive facial stages." As with his solitary magical moments, the past has surfaced involuntarily. But these double exposures, these palimpsests of time, are deeply troubling to him.

Let us take the example of Monsieur d'Argencourt. Having succeeded in identifying a guest as indeed Monsieur d'Argencourt (once an enemy), Marcel at first concludes that he has put on a disguise, that he "had turned himself into an old beggar who no longer inspired the least respect and [that] he put so much realism into his character of a driveling old man that his limbs shook and the flaccid features of his unusually haughty face smiled continually with a stupidly beatific expression" (255). It is an unusually haughty and cruel description. By assuming that Monsieur d'Argencourt is only *acting* old, Marcel is able to deny the physical realities of old age. At the same time, however, by ascribing old age to Monsieur d'Argencourt—and to the other guests—Marcel is able to deprive them of power (old age and power are in his eyes antithetical) and to distinguish himself from them. It is significant that the man who had long been a personal enemy of Marcel is portrayed as a "beggar" who thus requires no special attention. By relegating d'Argencourt to old age, Marcel renders him impotent. And Marcel, in his vindictiveness, can distance himself from blame. Unlike Freud, he feels no sense of guilt and takes only pleasure in his revenge, which has been achieved, he can tell himself, through the mere and neutral passing of time. But as readers we clearly see his guilty writing hand in his representations of old age.

Simultaneously fascinated and repelled by this theater of old age, Marcel describes at great length the grotesque spectacle of the physical appearance of his old friends and acquaintances, using metaphors drawn from the animal and plant kingdoms and the mineral world as if to suggest that they are less than human. At times the theater takes on the quality of the exotic absurd. The Duchesse de Guermantes, for example, is described as "an ancient and sacred fish," her "salmon-pink body barely emerging from its fins to black lace" (260–61). At other times the scene resembles a menacing Gothic melodrama. The stiff body of the aged actress Berma, for instance, is described as a crypt that imprisons what remains of her life. "Her hardened arteries being already half-petrified," Marcel muses, "long, narrow, sculpturesque ribbons of mineral-like rigidity could be discerned traversing her cheeks. Her dying eyes lived relatively by contrast with the horrible ossified mask and shone faintly like a serpent asleep among the rocks" (343). The body of old age is represented as a tomb. *Rigor mortis* has already set in. Here we see again the insistent contrast between the body, which is represented in terms of its lifeless *surface*, and what is left of life *inside*, here gruesomely figured as less than human, a snake. More generally, Proust consistently uses the imagery of the disintegration of the body in old age, as if the body were made of crumbling stone.

Marcel dwells on the texture of the skin in old age, itemizing the irregularities he finds revolting, implying that the *normal* condition of the skin is to be smooth (that is, young) and that thus the flaccid, wrinkled skin of old age is *abnormal*.

But old age is not just a breach of social manners or merely aesthetically unappealing in Marcel's eyes. He describes the Duchesse de Guermantes's cheeks, for example, "as composite as nougat" in which he could see "a trace of verdigris, a bit of pulverised pink shell, a swelling hard to describe, smaller than a mistletoe berry and less transparent than a glass bead" (274). And Monsieur de Cambremer, for instance, as having developed "huge red pouches on his cheeks, which hindered him from opening freely his mouth or his eyes with the result that I stood there stupefied, not daring to look at the carbuncles, so to speak, which it seemed to me proper he should mention first" (268). As Marcel stares surreptitiously at the carbuncles (painfully purulent inflammations of the skin which are symptoms of a severe and deep infection of the flesh), as he scrutinizes the skin of the other guests as if with a microscope, he is sickened to discover "a multitude of fatty splotches" under everyone's skin. Old age, in other words, is perceived by Marcel as a dangerous disease which may infect him as well.

How to avoid catching the disease? How to avoid not seeing the elderly? How to preserve the illusion that the world is populated by the young? The trick, Marcel concludes, is to keep a *correct distance*, that is to say, to keep one's distance from those who are old, to keep them at arm's length, as it were, to not come too close. Marcel puts it clinically, using a technological metaphor drawn from optometry: "with them [the guests] old age was dependent on the person looking at them; he had to assume the right position if he wished to see their faces remain young and had to cast on them only those distant glasses which make the object look smaller, without using the lens an optician selects for a far-sighted person; with them old age, as readily detected as infusoria in a drop of water, drew nearer, not with the progress of the years but in proportion as the vision of the observer moved along the scale of enlargement" (280). Note that old age is explicitly linked with "infusoria," minute organisms which my dictionary tells me are found especially in decomposing organic matter. And that keeping one's literal distance implies of course keeping one's emotional distance, of avoiding any form of intimacy. The avoidance of old age is made possible by a certain kind of spectatorship—of distance. I will return to the question of distance in the chapter on masquerade.

Interestingly enough, if a person has grown older but does not *look* older, that too Marcel finds disquieting and strange. The implication is that there is no way one can avoid the appearance of old age: it is signified by the *absence* of its telltale marks as well as by their *presence*. Marcel describes Madame de Forcheville, for example, as a brilliant oddity in whom the signs of old age—what today we refer to as age spots—at first seem to be assets, fantastic new growths, but at a second glance are confirmed to be liabilities, symbols of barrenness, as we see in this depiction of her appearance: it "was so miraculous

that one could not even say she had grown younger but rather that, with all her carmines and russet spots, she had burst into new bloom. She would have been the chief curiosity and principal attraction in a horticultural exhibition of the present day. . . . Moreover, just because she had not changed, she scarcely seemed to be alive. She looked like a sterilized rose'' (289). The attempt to arrest the signs of the process of aging on the surface of the body results, paradoxically, in the impression of sterility and death, not youth. As with Madame de Forcheville, so with the Princesse de Nassau: to be ''well preserved'' is metaphorically equivalent to being ''embalmed'' (323). In Marcel's eyes these unchanging women are ''monsters.'' They ''did not seem to have changed any more than whales,'' he thinks to himself in a bizarre analogy (279). The effect here is similar to that of the artificial and uncanny body of youth produced by plastic surgery. I will come back to this also in the chapter on masquerade.

Madame de Forcheville, here so cruelly vilified by Marcel, is the mother of Gilberte, whom he once adored. It is of course the case that many daughters age in the image of their mothers. In the eyes of Marcel this uncanny doubling is the most shocking of all because for him it calls into question the passion of youthful love and the very notion of the continuity of an identity. But why does it? Because Marcel wants to preserve untouched by time his sense of Gilberte as young. As much as Marcel insists on the importance to him of affective memory, in fact he is obsessed by what people look like. And he is repelled by what he sees in old age. He has no capacity, no psychic resources, for imagining at all, never mind positively, the transformations the body of a woman will undergo as she ages to become the ages of her mother before her. Marcel later reflects, ''It does us no good to know that the years go by, that youth gives way to old age, that the most stable thrones and fortunes crumble, that fame is ephemeral, our way of forming a conception—and, so to speak, taking a photograph—of this moving universe, hurried along by Time, seems on the contrary to make it stand still. Consequently, we always see as young the people we knew when we were young'' (305). There is of course a truth in this. But it is complicated. On the one hand, continuing to see as young the people we have known for a long time could mean that we preserve a certain intimate relation to them. In Marcel's case, however, the opposite is true. He does not recognize Gilberte. It is Gilberte who must say to him: '' 'You took me for Mamma; it is true I am beginning to look very much like her' '' (285). And if he is shocked to discover these changes in her, at the same time he does not seem too much to care.

I suspect it is true that we persist in carrying into old age images of our first loves as they were when they—and we—were young. Those of us who have attended high school or college reunions may know something of this. But for Marcel it is not just a *surprise* to see his first love after many years (are we not often taken by surprise?). It is a *shock*. When he is greeted by a ''stout lady'' (''stout'' of course carries negative connotations) he finds he must struggle to remember who she is. He recognizes this ''stout lady'' as Gilberte's mother. He then realizes that she is Gilberte. He is doubly blind to her. She has vanished into the past, or into the future—it is difficult for him to know which. As Proust so chillingly puts it, ''A name is frequently all that is left to us of a human being'' (308). Marcel has denied to Gilberte a future in maturity. All that is left of her in his mind is her ''name,'' which he cannot imagine connecting to her middle-aged body.

While Marcel reflects on what he understands as the *distorting* power of time on others, on their masks and disguises which he has himself in great part constructed, it comes to him with a shock that he too has been subject to the punishing law of time. It is only by seeing himself in the eyes of others that this ''truth'' is made clear to him. For Marcel, the drawing room of the Guermantes is a dizzying hall of mirrors where each person possesses the dangerous potential of reflecting the aging Marcel: ''Then it was that I, who from my early childhood had lived along from day to day with an unchanging conception of myself and others, for the first time, from the metamorphoses which had taken place in all these people, became conscious of the time that had gone by for them—*which greatly perturbed me through its revelation that that same time had gone by for me*. And though of no importance to me in itself, their old age made me desperately sad as an announcement of the *approach* of my own'' (260, italics mine). Moments later the old people surrounding him force him to acknowledge that he too is old. They hold up the mirror to him. What was abstract is now palpably real. ''I now understood,'' he reflects, ''what old age was—old age which, of all the realities, is perhaps the one concerning which we retain for the longest time a purely abstract conception'' (267). What he will never see, however, is that he is complicit in constructing a hideous vision of old age, that he is in part responsible for creating the double bind in which he feels he finds himself, that he has himself made the mirrors in which he sees himself reflected. Unable to identify himself sympathetically even in any small way with ''this old man'' or ''that old woman,'' as Beauvoir urges us to do in *The Coming of Age*, he thus dooms himself to a similar future, perpetuating a cycle of ageism.

What I find particularly interesting, as well as problematic, is that for the remainder of *The Past Recaptured* Marcel vacillates between the rhetoric of unbridled enthusiasm for the future and his new work, and the rhetoric of anxiety and physical vulnerability. He oscillates between blindness to his age and insight into it. For a moment he lucidly understands and is worried by the lie that his experience of old age (which he understands as the embodiment of the destructive effects of time) gives to his *idea* of time. He puts it cogently: ''a still graver

reason explained my distress; I was discovering the destructive action of time at the very moment when I was about to undertake to make clear and to intellectualise in a literary work some realities that had no relation whatsoever to time'' (265). On a thematic level he sees the contradiction. But after the initial shock that he has in fact aged—and indeed he has—he ''forgets'' or represses that perception in his eagerness to get his work underway.

Like an adolescent, he intoxicates himself with the ambitiousness of his project and what it will require of him. He vows to himself that he will ''endure it like an exhausting task, accept it like a rule of conduct, build it like a church, follow it like a regimen, overcome it like an obstacle, win it like a friendship, feed it intensively like a child, create it like a world'' (38). There is something strangely *hyper*energetic and frenetic about his response. The rhetorical figures of strength, discipline, tenacity, perseverance, and power alternate with those of weakness, debilitation, impotence, and senility. Proust is as successful in expressing the latter as he is the former. Marcel fusses. He worries that he may have a stroke or a car accident on the way home, or that he may contract the same illness which befell his grandmother. He recalls with foreboding that only recently as he was going down a flight of stairs, he almost fell three times. He broods that lately he has been exhausted to the point of paralysis. He fears that his forgetfulness is a sign of old age. Tellingly, he compares his anxiety to the condition of an elderly man: ''Strictly speaking, I had no particular illness but I felt as though I had become incapable of anything, as frequently happens to an old man, who, active the day before, breaks his hip or has an attack of indigestion and may for some time to come lead a bedridden existence which is now only more or less long preparation for the now inevitable end'' (392). As with Freud, Marcel associates old age with physical infirmity and a lack of productivity. For Freud, however, his whole life, unlike Marcel's, had been characterized by finished and successful projects, and Freud continued his habits of a lifetime into old age.

The Past Recaptured comes to an end with these thoughts. As readers we cannot follow Marcel into his future. But perhaps it is just as well that Proust closes his book with the contradiction posed by Marcel's double discoveries that afternoon. The lack of conclusion or resolution raises the important question of whether we should indeed accept the definition given to us by others which in effect ''castrates'' us. Is it wise in personal terms to recognize oneself as old? Should, in fact, one incorporate one's mirror image of old age as reflected in the eyes of others, the social world? Or is it more productive to deny it? Should one acknowledge a lack of time when, like Marcel, one has the desire to achieve something important? Perhaps for Marcel or anyone else with ambition, blindness to one's own old age is the most profound insight. Perhaps the future should remain concealed. As Anthony Wilden has put it, explicating Lacan, ''Truth

for the subject is not knowledge but recognition. . . . But a certain *méconnaissance*—which we might call sublimation—is essential to health.''[2] Or, perhaps, indeed, we have no choice. But if these are the questions posed by the text, they are not the questions we should ask in our actual world. The very definition of old age which is given to us by Marcel—and through him, Proust—should be called into question. The ideology associated with old age as decline must be brought to consciousness. This Marcel cannot do.

Yet the fictional world of *The Past Recaptured* prompts us also to ask if it is not precisely the relation between the two kinds of knowledge gained by Marcel that renders each insight possible. This would be paradoxical but not untenable. It does seem to me to make sense that on a conscious level one often struggles against limitations only when one is acutely aware of them. Certainly such a view of the relation between literature and life processes was held by Proust; as he insisted not too long before he died, creativity and illness are often linked, and often indissolubly so.[3] In *The Past Recaptured* Marcel himself, earlier in the afternoon, had explicitly associated old age with suffering, and suffering with artistic achievement. Indeed he figured the body in and of old age as a *sign* of productivity. He is speaking of grief, and referred to the titans Rembrandt and Beethoven. ''It is true that grief, which is not compatible with happiness or health, is sometimes prejudicial also to life,'' he muses. ''At each fresh, overpowering shock we feel another vein stand out and develop its deadly swellings along our temples, beneath our eyes. Thus were produced little by little those terrible, grief-ravaged faces of the aged Rembrandt and the aged Beethoven, whom everyone used to scoff at'' (237). And he concludes, romantically if not bombastically, ''let us allow our body to disintegrate, since each fresh particle that breaks off, now luminous and decipherable, comes and adds itself to our work'' (237).

But this is *before* he steps over the threshold, before he feels himself to be implicated in the *real* of old age. Later that afternoon Marcel concludes that productivity is often stanched by old age; ''even the best writers often cease producing at the approach of old age'' (351). Thus Marcel's ideas about aging, work, and time are contradictory and convoluted. Or as Walter Benjamin has put it, writing of Proust and reflecting on the notion that eternity for Proust was platonic or utopian, his ''true interest is in the passage of time in its most real—that is, space-bound—form, and this passage nowhere holds sway more openly than in remembrance within and aging without. To observe the interaction of aging and remembering means to penetrate to the heart of Proust's world, to the universe of convolution.''[4]

With these pages from Proust's *The Past Recaptured* in mind as a paradigm, we can imagine what I want to call a mirror stage of old age. Not only in Proust

but elsewhere the image of the mirror dominates western literary representations of the aged body (I will come back to this in a moment). This is not surprising. Given the western obsession with the body of youth, we can understand the "horror" of the mirror image of the "decrepit" body as having been produced as the inverse of the pleasures of the mirror image of the body of Narcissus. In part this may help explain the psychological phenomenon that as we age, we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies. We say that our real selves—that is, our youthful selves—are hidden inside our bodies. Our *bodies* are old, *we* are not. Old age is thus understood as a state in which the body is in opposition to the self. We are alienated from our bodies. I take this as a common psychological truth. Ask people in their sixties, seventies, perhaps eighties if they think of themselves as old. Most will insist that they feel the same way they did when they were thirty or forty, that *they* haven't changed, although their mirror image has. Or they will say that their body—now a *foreign* body—has betrayed them (one is never so aware of one's body as when one suffers from it). Or more vociferously, they will assert that the body is the oppressor and that they are hostage to it, or as in the words of the Duke of York in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, that they are "prisoner to the palsy" (II.ii.104).[5] As Marcel observes in an earlier volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, "It is in the moments of illness that we are compelled to recognise that we live not alone but chained to a creature of a different kingdom, whole worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body."[6] Or as Marcel bluntly puts it in *The Past Recaptured*, "Having a body constitutes the principal danger that threatens the mind" (387).

We may think of ourselves as young, but others will perceive us as old, perhaps even ancient. As we have seen, this is marvelously dramatized in *The Past Recaptured*. "We did not see ourselves or our own ages in their true light," reflects Marcel, "but each of us saw the others as accurately as though he had been a mirror held up before them" (265). In *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir explains this phenomenon by arguing, following Sartre, that old age belongs to the category of the "unrealizables." *We* are not old; it is the Other, the stranger within us, who is old. We cannot simply say that if we feel young, then we are young. Age is socially as well as biologically determined. As Beauvoir concludes, the recognition of our own old age comes to us from the Other, that is, from society. We study our own reflection in the body of others, and as we reflect upon that reflection, we ultimately are compelled to acknowledge the point of view of the Other which has, as it were, installed itself in our body. In *The Coming of Age* Beauvoir explains the complex "truth" of old age this way: "for the outsider it is a dialectic relationship between my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself that I acquire by means of

him. Within me it is the Other—that is to say the person I am for the outsider—who is old: and that Other is myself" (420). As we saw in *The Past Recaptured*, we may be complicit in producing the meanings associated with what is now or will be our own condition.

I have insisted on the fact that in *The Past Recaptured* the affect of *shock* (terror, horror, disgust, fear) is associated with Marcel's recognition that he has grown definitively old. A scene from the history of psychoanalysis can help us understand the psychological etiology of this reaction and at the same time show us how embedded both Freudian analysis and modern literature, here exemplified by Proust, are in the western idolatry of youth and fear of aging. With Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" (1919) in mind, I want to suggest that to see, like Marcel, one's own aged body with a shock of recognition is to experience the *uncanny*. Freud describes the uncanny as "related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror," "feelings of repulsion and distress" (SE 17: 219). He theorizes that the origins of the uncanny lie in the infantile stage of the psychological development of the individual and in the primitive phase of the development of the human species when mankind believed the world to be populated by the spirits of dead. In terms of the uncanny, then, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Freud further analyzes the uncanny as something "familiar that has been repressed," and concludes that "an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (SE 17: 249). He associates the uncanny with castration anxiety and a feeling of "frightening things" (SE 17: 241) as well as with the image of the double. Finally, following Otto Rank, Freud observes that whereas in the early stages of human history the double was an assurance of immortality and a powerful weapon against death, it later became a harbinger of death which it has remained to this day. This theory of the double is particularly interesting in terms of the subject of aging, and I will return to it in a moment.

But first I want to pursue Freud as he inscribes himself in his essay on the uncanny. Freud presents his essay as a tentative exploration of the phenomenon of the uncanny rather than a definitive study. He protests in the opening pages that he has had little personal experience of the uncanny and thus must turn to literature for evidence. In his customary self-deprecating manner, he asserts, "the writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter where extreme delicacy of perception would be more in place." He insists, "It is long since he has experienced or heard anything which has given him an uncanny impression, and he must start by translating himself into that state of feeling" (SE 17: 220).

These demurs are curious in two respects. First, this is the only passage in

"The Uncanny" where Freud refers to himself in the third person. Elsewhere he writes with ease in the first person, both singular and plural. Here, appearing uncomfortable, he finds it necessary to create, as it were, another character, referring to himself as "he." Secondly, later in the essay Freud does in fact recount an experience of the uncanny drawn from his own life. It had occurred some time earlier while he was traveling in Italy. In a small town he found himself in the red light district, and trying to escape, kept returning involuntarily to the very same piazza, not once, but twice.

Far more significant for our purposes, however, is another of his personal experiences of the uncanny—no doubt a much more recent one—which finds its way into a footnote near the end of the essay. In it Freud describes the shock of recognition of meeting his double who is "elderly" (Freud was sixty-three when the essay on the uncanny was published). It is as if Freud could not incorporate this experience into the body of the text and into the main line of his speculations on the uncanny. But like the uncanny itself, what one desires to remain concealed does indeed surface. Freud found it necessary to relegate it to the margins, repressing his own experience. The passage deserves to be quoted in full:

> Since the uncanny effect of a "double" also belongs to this same group it is interesting to observe what the effect is of meeting one's own image unbidden and unexpected. Ernst Mach has related two such observations in his *Analyse der Empfindungen* (1900, 3). On the first occasion he was not a little startled when he realized that the face before him was his own. The second time he formed a very unfavourable opinion about the supposed stranger who entered the omnibus, and thought "What a shabby-looking school-master that man is who is getting in!"—I can report a similar adventure. I was sitting alone in my *wagon-lit* compartment when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a travelling cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet, which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that *the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass of the open door*. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance. Instead, therefore, of being frightened by our "doubles," both Mach and I simply failed to recognize them as such. Is it not possible, though, that our dislike of them was a vestigial trace of the archaic reaction which feels the "double" to be something uncanny? (SE 17: 248n, italics mine)

Freud's mirror image of himself as elderly is that of the trespasser, of the interloper in the private domain of narcissism. In this little drama we see the material of the unconscious rising through the open door into the conscious. Or, we could say, paraphrasing Freud, who believed that in the unconscious everyone is persuaded of his own immortality, *in the unconscious everyone is persuaded of his own youth*. It is not so much our own death which is unimaginable, as Freud has it, as our own old age. Freud says he was not "terrified" by his double. He is specific about the affect associated with his recognition of his own mirror image, which is more subtle than blunt terror. He was "dismayed" by it, he "thoroughly disliked his appearance." For that appearance represents the future absence of Freud himself, *nothing* (it "was nothing"), his own death. Aging is explicitly linked with death through the affect of the uncanny.[7] What Freud sees is the image of the Other, to use Beauvoir's terminology, an image Freud would prefer not to recognize. The mirror image is uncanny because, as I argued in the previous chapter, it is something familiar that has been repressed—old age.

Clinical research has confirmed that Freud's experience was not uncommon. Robert Butler's seminal essay on what he has theorized as the late-life phenomenon of the life review contains a fascinating report of clinical cases of pathological disturbances in elderly people involving mirrors. Although Butler refers to the "apparently common phenomenon" of "mirror-gazing" only in passing, his remarks are provocative and suggest the fruitfulness of further research along these lines, as the following clinical summary reveals:

> Another patient, eighty-six years old and periodically confused, often stood before the mirror in his hospital room and rhythmically chanted either happily or angrily. He was especially given to angry flareups and crying spells over food, money, and clothes. When angry he would screech obscenities at his mirror image, so savagely beating his fist upon a nearby table that the staff tried to protect him by covering the mirror. . . . [He] denied that the image was himself, and when an observer came up beside him and said, "See, this is me in the mirror and there you are in the mirror," he smiled and said, "That's you in the mirror all right, but that's not me." (68)

We can understand this patient's radical rejection of his mirror image as the pathological equivalent of Freud's failure in the train to recognize his own mirrored double.

In *The Coming of Age* Beauvoir chronicles countless instances from the historical record of this obsession of the elderly with their mirror images. The weight of their testimony is impressive. I repeat here some of their words, all of which record their despair at their mirrored images. The aging Michelangelo: "I am betrayed: my mirror image is my traitor, and my fleeting days" (763). Gide at eighty: "Oh, come now, I really must not meet myself in a mirror—these eyes with bags under them, these hollow cheeks, this lifeless look. I am hideous and it depresses me terribly" (443). Wagner, on seeing his reflection in a store window: "I do not recognize myself in that grey head: can I possibly be sixty-eight?" (443). Madame de Sévigné at sixty-one: "If at the age of twenty we were given the position of the eldest member of the family and if we were

taken to a mirror and shown the face that we should have or do have at sixty, comparing it with that at twenty, we should be utterly taken aback and it would frighten us'' (424). And Madame de Sévigné at sixty-three: ''It appears to me that in spite of myself I have been dragged to this inevitable point where old age must be undergone: I see it there before me; I have reached it; and I should at least like so to arrange matters that I do not move on, that I do not travel farther along this path of the infirmities, pains, losses of memory and the disfigurement'' (427). For ''inevitable'' (''I have been dragged to this inevitable point where old age must be undergone'') we might read instead ''invisible.'' But paradoxically this invisible point is also the point of *hypervisibility*. What was invisible, what she did not recognize—her own old age—is now made painfully visible. This denial of one's image is also dramatized in Louis Aragon's novel *La Mise à mort* in which the hero, incapable of conceiving of himself as old, literally does not see his own reflection in the mirror. (We should not forget that late in life Aragon himself refused to appear in public without a smooth mask that covered his wrinkled face.)

Although Beauvoir maintains that we respond to our mirror image in accordance with whether our attitude toward old age is basically positive or negative, her analysis points toward the latter. We inevitably despair, she insists, insofar as old age ''is summed up by the words decrepitude, ugliness and ill-health'' (60). She believes that to so respond is *natural*, that ''we must always have some cause for uneasiness before we stand and study the reflection offered us by the looking-glass'' (425). Note, however, that Beauvoir is defining old age here only in terms of the *body*—what it looks like, what its state of health is. In this respect her analysis of old age unwittingly in part reinforces our culture's negative assessment of old age.

Is the obsession with mirrors a symptom of this ''stage'' in life—old age—or is this stage triggered by one's mirrored image, by the reflections of others, that is, by the values held up to us by our society? Although knowledge of old age certainly can come to us from our infirmities (our own bodies can speak to us of old age), I want to insist again that old age is in great part constructed by any given society as a social category, as is, for example, adolescence. The mirror our culture holds up to the elderly contains the feared image of death. This is why Freud did not at first recognize himself in that image of an elderly gentleman. This is why that image aroused the ''dread and creeping horror'' he associates with the uncanny, for the Other was indeed oneself. It uncannily prefigured the coming years of suffering which Freud was destined to live out.

Psychoanalysis insists of course on the alienating effects of identification with an image. This insistence is perhaps strongest in the work of Lacan. By now in fact it will have become clear to many readers that we can hypothesize the mirror stage of old age as the inverse of the mirror stage of infancy proposed

by Lacan.[8] Observing that an infant from six to eighteen months is fascinated by his mirror image, Lacan theorizes that the infant *perceives* the image of his body as a harmonious whole and ideal unity while simultaneously *experiencing* his own body as uncoordinated. It is this discrepancy between the visual image of unity and the lived experience of fragmentation that gives rise to the ego and to the subject forever split, to pleasurable anticipation of wholeness in the future as well as to alienation. The mirror stage ushers the subject into the domain of the imaginary, a domain prior to language and largely dominated by images.

In ''The Line and the Light'' (1964), Lacan stresses that in the ''matter of the visible, everything is a trap'' (*FF* 93). In old age we might say, following this analysis, that in western culture all mirrors are potentially threatening. As in the mirror stage of infancy, in the mirror stage of old age the subject is confronted with an image. If he identifies with it, he is transformed. In the mirror stage of infancy, the infant enters the imaginary. In the mirror stage of old age, the subject enters the social realm reserved for ''senior citizens'' in the western world. But the point is that the subject *denies* this identification rather than embraces it. The mirror stage of old age is the inverse of the mirror stage of infancy. What is whole is felt to reside *within*, not *without*, the subject. The image in the mirror is understood as uncannily prefiguring the disintegration and nursling dependence of advanced age.

In theorizing the mirror stage of infancy, Lacan writes of the structural relation between paranoia and mastery. From the beginning one is structured as a rival with oneself. Human knowledge is paranoiac. According to Lacan, the infant holds his mirror image in an amorous gaze. But the elderly person wishes to reject it—and thereby to reject old age for himself. What Lacan writes of the mirror stage of infancy in ''The Freudian Thing'' (1955) can be applied to the mirror stage of old age: ''It is thus that the functions of mastery, which we incorrectly call the synthesizing functions of the ego, establish on the basis of a libidinal alienation the development that follows from it, namely, what I once called the paranoiac principle of human knowledge'' (*Ecrits* 138). In the mirror stage of old age, one is libidinally alienated from one's mirror image. If the psychic plot of the mirror stage of infancy is the anticipated trajectory from insufficiency to bodily wholeness, the bodily plot of the mirror stage of old age is the feared trajectory from wholeness to physical disintegration. The affect associated with it is one of despair, not joy. And the hostility toward others which is associated with the mirror stage of infancy is now reflected back upon oneself as well as projected onto others. Aggressivity, about which I will have more to say in the next chapter, is intensified and now directed back upon oneself: this aging body is not my self.[9]

If the mirror image of infancy is a lure in the Lacanian sense, we might say that in the old age our culture has constructed we desire our mirror image to

function as does *trompe l'oeil*, to reveal itself precisely *not* as what it so shockingly presents to us as ourselves. As Freud emphasizes in developing his theory of the intricate entwining of the body and the psyche, "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego . . . the projection of a surface" (SE 19: 26). The I or ego which is developed in the mirror stage of infancy is structured precisely to resist the anxiety of bodily fragmentation. In old age, with one's position reversed before the mirror, the ego finds it more difficult to maintain its defenses. The Lacanian ambivalence that has been felt all one's life before mirrors—the constant checking and comparing—is exacerbated to an almost intolerable point. Like one of Robert Butler's elderly patients, one may want to turn the face of the mirror to the wall. Or like Marcel at the reception at the Guermantes', one may avoid identification with one's age counterparts.

This too would be a reversal of the trajectory of development in infancy. After the infant identifies with its mirror image (its ideal ego), Lacan theorizes that there is a "deflection of the specular *I* into the social *I*" (*Ecrits* 5). The child identifies—literally at first—with the images of others. Lacan brilliantly explicates desire as the desire to be recognized by the other. He puts it succinctly this way: "man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because *the first object* of desire is to be recognized by the other" (*Ecrits* 58, italics mine). At stake in the mirror stage of old age is the relation between the imaginary other and the symbolic Other, which Lacan himself associates with death.[10] Thus, *the last object* of desire may be *to not be recognized by the other*, which in the case of old age is the Other, represented by the very old themselves. At this point perceptual unpleasure, as elucidated by Freud, escalates to almost ontological proportions. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud writes, "Most of the unpleasure that we experience is *perceptual* unpleasure. It may be . . . external perception which is either distressing in itself or which excites unpleasurable expectations in the mental apparatus—that is, which is recognized by it as a 'danger'" (SE 17: 11). In the hallucinatory drawing room of mirrors crowded with grotesque images of old age in *The Past Recaptured*, the danger prompts the psyche to repress, or deny, it. The theater of old age provokes Marcel's gaze in the Lacanian sense. As Lacan says in "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze" (1964), when the world begins to provoke our gaze, "the feeling of strangeness begins too" (*FF* 75).

Strangeness, the uncanny, old age, decrepitude, death, fear, danger—all are linked together in this momentary drama of the mirror stage of old age. In the mirror stage of old age, the narcissistic impulse directs itself *against* the mirror image as it is embodied literally and figuratively in the faces and bodies—the images—of old people. If, then, the mirror stage of infancy initiates the imaginary, the mirror stage of old age may precipitate the loss of the imaginary. Where then would we be located? Outside the mirror? Caught between the double and the absent?[11]

As Lacan conceives it, the mirror stage of infancy is primarily a biological and psychological phenomenon (interestingly enough, he refers to experimentation with other species—the pigeon, the migratory locust—which suggests that development is contingent upon the presence of an image of one's own species). Basically the mirror stage is prior to socialization and prior to language, although the role of the mother is crucial and although we can understand the phenomenon of the mirror stage only retrospectively and through language. As Lacan puts it in his essay on "The Mirror Stage," the mirror stage enacts the formation (he uses the vivid term "precipitation") of the I before "it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it . . . its function as subject" (*Ecrits* 2). In contrast, the mirror stage of old age is more obviously rooted in the social and economic theater of a given historical moment. Thus we might further speculate that if the mirror stage of infancy is distinguished by the perception of binary opposition, the mirror stage of old age is more problematic. It is inherently triangular, involving the gaze of others as well as two images of oneself. In addition, one understands—consciously or unconsciously—that there is a relationship between the two terms (the two images of the self) such that one is incorporated within the other. It is not so much a matter of either-or as it is a matter of both-and. But within the terms of the mirror stage of old age as I have been describing it, one blocks knowledge of one of the two terms.

If (temporarily) blinding ourselves to our own aging may give us a kind of psychic reprieve, we must also be aware of the social consequences of perceiving the elderly as alien to ourselves. If our vision is fundamentally narcissistic, the way we look at others functions to protect ourselves. Those like Marcel who see themselves as on the threshold of old age deny full humanity to an aged person so as to preserve their own illusion of immortality. I will develop this at some length in the next chapter. Christopher Lasch points out in *The Culture of Narcissism* that our dread of old age has its origins not in a cult of youth but in a cult of the self.[12] But the two come to the same thing. It is important to stress here the relationship between narcissism and aggression. When one's narcissism is wounded, the result is aggression. The observations of the psychoanalyst Gregory Rochlin, who has written on aggression as well as the psychology of loss in old age, are particularly useful in this context. Rochlin asserts, "No experience brings out the effect in self-esteem more immediately than when it is associated with the body. The integrity of one's shape and bodily function holds the deepest and perhaps longest-standing investment in respect

to self-esteem."[13] As we have seen, hostility borne toward others is also feared from them through projection, and aggression can complete its return in the form of self-destruction.

Perhaps most significant, such narcissistic hostility allows the elderly to be rejected as a class more easily—as an alien species or, as in *The Past Recaptured*, as unreal, a mere illusion, a grotesque and transitory spectacle, a hyperscene of total theater that hopefully will soon be over, covered by the fall of the curtain. As we see with Marcel, for him to preserve psychological "health" (*méconnaissance*) on a personal level requires him to regard the elderly as an inferior class. Such a psychic habit of mind reinforces and perpetuates oppression of the elderly on the level of society. (I am here conflating old age and decrepitude which, although they are by no means identical, are for the most part equated in our cultural imagination.) For like sexism and racism, ageism is prejudice rooted in physical difference as well as in discrepancies in social power. As we know, throughout western history the elderly have been rejected as a class which consumes more than it produces. Recently the aged have been forgotten and hidden from sight in nursing homes and hospitals by the narcissistic younger social body, by those in power.

In *The Denial of Death* Ernest Becker argues that a culture is built primarily not on the repression of sexuality, as Freud believes, but on the repression of death, whose symbol is the human body, the "curse of fate."[14] Old age in our culture is characterized by a double bind, by personal and social conflict as intense as the Oedipal conflict that arises in childhood. This helps us understand Beauvoir's disillusioning statement in *The Coming of Age*: "whatever the context may be, the biological facts remain. For every individual age brings with it a dreaded decline. It is in complete conflict with the manly or womanly ideal cherished by the young and fully-grown. The immediate, natural attitude is to reject it, in so far as it is summed up by the words decrepitude, ugliness and ill-health. Old age in others also causes an instant repulsion. This primitive reaction remains alive even when custom represses it; and in this we see the origin of a conflict that we shall find exemplified again and again" (60). Old age is constructed as a social category, but it has a biological dimension which she believes the young cannot help but reject. Her words echo these of Nietzsche: "every table of values, every 'thou shalt' known to history, requires first a physiological investigation and interpretation."[15] In old age, then, as we saw in the last chapter, we may encounter yet again another form of the battle between civilization and its discontents.

Can we invent in our culture new meanings of old age so that we need not fight this battle with ourselves and others? Can we imagine mirrors which reflect other images of old age back to us? Can we associate not shock but other kinds of affect with growing old? Erikson has repeatedly argued that we oscillate

between despair and acceptance—what he calls integrity—of our lives and our approaching death in advanced old age. He embraces an ego psychology with an assurance as strong as the contempt with which Lacan rejects it. As Erikson said in an interview when he was eighty-six, "You've got to learn to accept the law of life, and face the fact that we disintegrate slowly."[16] Erikson is not, on balance, in shock turning the mirror to the wall. In part I think it is because he has been looking into a different theoretical mirror throughout his life in psychoanalysis. He has consistently looked into a mirror populated by several generations. He is not *shocked* by aging because he has been anticipating it and expecting it, not repressing it. His mirror resembles Winnicott's mirror, not Lacan's. For Winnicott, "*The precursor of the mirror is the mother's face.*"[17] What the baby sees is already a reflection of his mother's response to him. The interplay is endlessly interrelated and animated (hopefully) by love, not motivated by a solipsistic narcissism. A mirror is then something to be looked *into*, not looked *at*. As Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, "it is not indifference which erases the weight of the image . . . but love, extreme love."[18] We can extend this reflection further across time, beyond infancy. In the same essay Winnicott observes that "when a family is intact and is a going concern over a period of time each child derives benefit from being able to see himself or herself in the attitude of the individual members or in attitudes of the family as a whole" (188). Although he is referring to a young child, we can expand this notion throughout the years. We may wish to reject our body in old age, but we may find the strength to accept it through a kind of familiarity with its images reflected to us in the bodies of generations older. This would be to emphasize genealogical continuities rather than discontinuities.

At the same time there may be a limit beyond which we cannot go. At this limit, which is not located in a middle age of physical health, being repelled by (or even disinterested in) one's own body may be part of the process of accommodating death in the aging body. This would be a process through which we acknowledge the reality we would like to reject but cannot, a process by which we define a form of separateness through rejection, a form of adaptive repulsion in advanced old age analogous to the function of depression, guilt, and other negative states of childhood. This would be a process which is a sign of achieved psychic organization, not failure.[19] I think here of one of Beauvoir's observations about her mother in *A Very Easy Death*. Her mother, in her seventies, desperately ill and near her death, had passed beyond the mirror stage of old age: "She had not asked for a mirror again: her dying face did not exist for her."[20]

COUNTER-TEXT

[Silence. The Young Woman approaches Madeleine, and shows her the dress.]

The Young Woman: Look . . . you know, this is the dress you wore in the film *Le Voyage au Siam*.

Madeleine: Oh yes . . . yes . . . it suits you perfectly . . . perfectly . . .

[The Young Woman draws Madeleine into the spotlight where an imaginary mirror is located. They both look together at Madeleine's reflection.]

The Young Woman: Look at yourself . . .

[Silence.]

Madeleine (transparently): I think I look beautiful.

[Silence.]

Madeleine: Red looks very good on me . . . it always has . . . and it's also this particular dress . . .

—Madeleine, an actress of advanced age, eighty perhaps, *from* Marguerite Duras, *Savannah Bay* 105–106

4. The Look and the Gaze: Narcissism, Aggression, and Aging . . .

Virginia Woolf's *The Years*

AS WE SAW IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, Lacan's stress on the strict structural relationship between narcissism and aggressivity is useful in understanding our culture's dominant representations of aging. In "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" (1948), we read: "This narcissistic moment in the subject is to be found in all the genetic phases of the individual. . . . This conception allows us to understand the aggressivity involved . . . with each of the great phases that the libidinal transformations determine in human life, the crucial function of which has been demonstrated by analysis: weaning, the Oedipal stages, puberty, maturity, or motherhood, even the climacteric."[1] In the last chapter I drew on Lacan's theory of the mirror stage of infancy, which is structurally the primary (and preparatory) moment of narcissistic identification and alienation. What interests me here is that Lacan invokes a dramatic conception of the life course with its "great phases" and libidinal transformations (not "stages") which we might more readily associate with his psychoanalytic opposite, Erikson. Lacan's emphasis on *libidinal* transformations is significant. As he puts it elsewhere in the same essay, referring to the Oedipus complex, "the energy for that identification is provided by the first biological upsurge of genital libido" (*Ecrits* 22). The biological is not, in other words, completely absent from Lacan. We are invited to wonder what would be associated with

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