CHAPTER 1

Aging Theory

The Surface of Aging

While characters of different ages appear in most novels, the process of aging rarely rises to the level of representation. It is a convention for the realist novel to use events such as illness or trauma to speed up the aging of its characters. In George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), the childless Sir Christopher plans to settle his property on his nephew, the handsome Captain Wybrow. Yet Wybrow dies abruptly from a heart condition, dashing Sir Christopher's hopes for the future. Grief ages him overnight:

> It was the first time Mr. Gilfil had had an interview with him [Sir Christopher] this morning, and he was struck to see how a single day and night of grief had aged the fine old man. The lines in his brow and about his mouth were deepened; his complexion looked dull and withered; there was a swollen ridge under his eyes; and the eyes themselves, which used to cast so keen a glance on the present, had the vacant expression which tells that vision is no longer a sense, but a memory. (150)

Occurring just after the traumatic event of Wybrow's death, Sir Christopher's aging takes a mere twenty-four hours to write itself onto his body, shocking the chaplain with the sudden intensification of the signs of old age: lines deepen, the complexion dulls, eyes swell. Such bodily transformations are coupled with the character's modified relation to temporality: his "keen . . . glance on the present" gives way to a "vacant expression" that signifies his absorption in memory and the past. The present loses meaning for the aged Sir Christopher, which corresponds to the way that the narrative compresses the duration of his aging into the brief interval of a single day.

Aging has happened, but rarely happens. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) exemplifies this aspect of the narrative representation of aging. Throughout the novel Dorian's age (and his vices) do not appear

on his body but on his portrait, painted by his admirer Basil Hallward. Dorian passes most of his life without the usual wrinkles and gray hairs associated with growing older, retaining his youthful appearance and beauty. Yet he is miserable. After years of debauchery, Dorian destroys the painting that absorbs the depredations of time and sin. But rather than setting him free from the past, this action causes the repressed years to flood back in an instant: "When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was" (177). Dorian's transformation occurs with the cutting swiftness of the knife's blade, cleaving his youthful persona and his elderly one in a moment. The sudden onset of age makes him unrecognizable to the servants who saw him daily.

Though most novels do not represent aging with the fantastic swiftness of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's example illuminates the conventional ways Victorians represented characters growing older. In George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), a novel intensely concerned with how age impacts societal expectations, the middle-aged Edmund Widdowson suffers with jealousy regarding his young wife. As a result of the strain, in "the three of four months since his marriage, he seemed to have grown older; he no longer held himself so upright" (168). Another example occurs near the end of the novel after about two years of marriage: "when out of doors [he] seldom raised his eyes from the ground; grey streaks had begun to brindle his hair; his face grew yellower and more deeply furrowed" (362). Though Widdowson does not age with the same fatal instantaneity as Dorian, the effect produced by the prose is the same. As Widdowson's unhappy marriage accelerates his aging, Gissing contracts the duration of aging into moments of retrospective description.

Thus, the present tense of aging continually slips into the past, as something to be excavated and kept at a critical distance rather than experienced immediately. The realist novel's default third-person, retrospective narration slots the aging of its characters into the recovered past, able to show the effects of aging only after it has already occurred. The extended length of novels makes them especially adept at repressing the duration of aging. In Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), for example, the final chapter skips ahead eleven years and registers the bodily changes that occur to Pip's father-in-law Joe, who is now "a little grey," and his beloved Estella, who has lost "the freshness of her beauty"

(*Great*, 482–3). The aging of the characters, which forms the most important plot development at this final stage of the narrative, retreats quietly between the chapters. Reflecting on the novel form provokes the bewildered question that arises at moments of critical age awareness: where did the time go?

The attempt to represent aging as a process is rare, and often extraordinary when the author attempts it. In Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), the process of aging becomes monstrous. Jekyll's potion enables him to indulge in his repressed desires by giving him another body, allowing Hyde to debauch himself without affecting Jekyll's reputation. One of the central transformations between the two characters relates to age: while Jekyll is "a smooth-faced man of fifty," Hyde appears as a "comparative youth" with "light step, leaping impulses and secret pleasures" (12, 49). Hyde is not a monster, but merely a man without social accountability – a trait that Stevenson emphasizes by suturing antisocial behavior with the unboundedness of youth: "I felt younger, lighter, happier in body; within I was conscious of a heady recklessness . . . a solution of the bonds of obligation, an unknown but not an innocent freedom of the soul" (44). Hyde quickly fills the blank slate of youth with a bloody act of murder.

The reader eventually witnesses the transformation of Hyde into Jekyll through Dr. Lanyon's posthumous testimony. Observing Hyde quaff the mixture, Lanyon writes: "as I looked there came, I thought, a change – he seemed to swell – his face became suddenly black and the features seemed to melt and alter – and the next moment, I had sprung to my feet and leaped back against the wall, my arm raised to shield me from that prodigy, my mind submerged in terror" (41). While Lanyon's language adopts an appropriately ominous tone for the dreadful transformation, this scene can also be read as a simple commentary on the process of growing older. The swelling and darkening features mark the passing of time accelerated to the point where its effects become visible in the present moment. The horror that such transformation causes in the observer arises not from splitting one man into two, but from drawing to the surface of the body the latent metamorphoses of aging itself.

H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1886) also concludes with a spectacular scene of accelerated aging when Ayesha leads the two male protagonists to a flame that grants eternal life. When Ayesha enters the flame for a second time it reverses her immortality: "she *was* shrivelling up . . . smaller and smaller she grew; her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow, like an old piece of

withered parchment . . . the skin was puckered into a million wrinkles, and on the shapeless face was the stamp of unutterable age" (257). Observing the rapid aging of Ayesha occur before his eyes, the narrator exclaims that "nobody ever saw anything like the frightful age that was graven on that fearful countenance . . . and let all men pray they never may, if they wish to keep their reason" (257). Together, the examples from Stevenson and Haggard illustrate the horror of making age a visible process. Moreover, the narrator of *She* warns that registering the duration of aging goes against reason, a claim that receives added support from the fact that both Stevenson and Haggard turn away from realism to more fantastic modes of representation (though, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, Thomas Hardy also experiments with ways to represent a wrinkle in the process of development). Whether aging is elided or made terrible, Victorian novels continually attest to the imaginative difficulty of representing someone growing old.

Aging challenges the temporal limits of representation. In *Dreaming by the Book* Elaine Scarry asks, "How do writers get us to move pictures in our minds?" (76). This question proves difficult to answer, since it is in the nature of movement to continually shift ground. Her book takes an unconventional approach by relying on thought experiments that enlist the reader's imagination for support. She asks the reader to imagine a bird in flight and experiment by imaginatively placing filters over the event, such as gauze, which enable the reader to better picture the movement (76). However, movements such as aging occur "slower than perceptible motion" (172). In this case, Scarry argues that many authors bring growing older "within the radius of our compositional powers" by combining the development of the human body with the blossoming, wilting, and budding of the vegetable world (173). The imagination of movement always involves the imagination of something else, whether through the act of layering a film over the movement or imbricating one process with another.

Scarry's argument helps to clarify how narratives represent aging. While it is easy to imagine a human who is young or old, it is much more difficult to imagine a person in the *process* of aging. If one imagines an adolescent aging into adulthood and on to old age, she will find it difficult to image this process as a seamless, continuous movement. Rather, the body that she imagines will probably go through a series of stages that progress in a linear manner. Each image settles into progressively more aged glimpses of the individual, approximating the movement of a flipbook animation rather than the "melt[ing] and alter[ing]" we observed earlier in the case of Hyde's transformation. The temporal continuity of an individual life

resists representation, and aging is usually registered narratively as a past event recounted in the present. From these examples, we observe a tendency in narrative to skip over the duration of aging, a tendency that is reinforced by the form's difficulty representing it. The discourse of age gravitates toward completed states. Thus, in a surprising reversal, one of the most intimately continuous experiences of human life – our aging – is continually translated through discourse into a sequence of snapshots.

Recent attempts at addressing duration, by critics such as Nicholas Dames and Amit Yahav, look to music – in the form of rhythm, repetition, and bodily feeling – to reconstruct how the novel "absorbs characters and readers into shared durations."[1] In their respective studies, Dames and Yahav argue that duration is a deep structure of narrative that is communicated through the reader's passive absorption of sentence level units. Sue Zemka writes in *Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society* that duration "goes underground, and finds a home in the novelistic unconscious, that is to say, in reading time itself" (218). But the examples of aging I am interested in do not occur at a deep, structural level but on the surface of representation. When a novelist wants the reader to see a character age, she wants the description to move. The critical move of extracting a hidden duration from the depths of experience reinstates the remoteness of duration – the suspicion that duration merely allows experience to be temporally quantifiable in the way that a metronome beats out time in the background of a musical piece. To analyze duration as temporal depth addresses only one of its dimensions and has the unfortunate consequence of rendering duration's surface effects – the simple appearance of change, transformation, and movement – into an epiphenomenon of a more real and yet inaccessible structure.

As Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus write in "Surface Reading," the introduction to their 2009 special issue of *Representations*, surface reading provides a methodological alternative to approaches that assume "the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses" (3). Best and Marcus "take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding . . . A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*" (9). For these authors, the dichotomy of surface and depth is replaced by a monism of surface, so that "underneath surface there is only more surface" and that "depth is continuous with surface and is thus an effect of immanence" (8–9, 11). Symptomatic reading and the hermeneutics of suspicion translate the surface of the text into a deceptive, ideological layer that the critic must heroically overcome to reach "the truth that the text conceals" (17).

In her article "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," Heather Love attempts to avoid literary criticism's latent humanism by grounding her reading in the practices of description inspired by sociology. "Good descriptions," Love writes, "are in a sense rich, but not because they truck with imponderables like human experience or human nature. They are close, but they are not deep; rather than adding anything 'extra' to the description, they account for the real variety that is already there" (377). Depth is not only something that critics reveal, but something that they produce "by attributing life, richness, warmth, and voice to texts" and thus reproducing an "unacknowledged but powerful humanism" (388).

In reacting against the ideology critique that has become synonymous with literary criticism, Best, Marcus, and Love take the argument a step too far. Reclaiming the surface as a site worthy of close attention does not necessitate the additional move of eliminating depths. In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski takes a skeptical view of surfaces, questioning whether "the metaphor of the surface is the best way of capturing the merits of the new directions they canvass. After all, the oscillation between surface and depth is a very familiar theme within aesthetics, a matter of complementary rather than mutually exclusive approaches" (55). The removal of depths, moreover, involves relinquishing one of the most powerful tools of literary criticism – the distance that enables criticism itself. Positing the distinction between surfaces and depths does not require giving up on surfaces altogether. Though the surface has long been associated with the superficiality of the commodity and the culture of instant gratification, some philosophers provide ways of complicating the surface–depth binary. Bergson's philosophical method of intuition, which I discuss in the introduction as how one "installs" oneself into duration, serves as a particularly powerful way of theorizing surfaces and depths together. He writes that

> the forces which work in all things we feel within ourselves; whatever may be the inner essence of what is done, we are of that essence. Let us then go down into our own inner selves: *the deeper the point we touch, the stronger will be the thrust which sends us back to the surface*. Philosophical intuition is the contact, philosophy is this impetus. Brought back to the surface by an impulsion from the depth, we shall regain contact with science as our thought opens out and disperses. (*Creative Mind*, 103; emphasis added)

Here, Bergson defines the gap between subject and object through the way analysis proceeds from depths to surfaces. The deeply introspective movement of intuition does not merely result in hidden knowledge of one's self,

but redirects the philosopher back to the surface of things. As Elizabeth Grosz writes in "Bergson, Deleuze and the Becoming of Unbecoming," "If one reaches deeply enough, one finds a continuity with the surface, one rebounds directly to things in their immediacy" (8). For Bergson, the goal is not to arrive at knowledge of either surfaces *or* depths, but to find significance in the fluid relationship between the two terms, figured here as a kind of elasticity that causes the individual to swing from depth to surface with a force equal to the intensity of the original intuitive impulse.[2]

Inspired by Bergson and the Stoics, Gilles Deleuze makes a theory of surfaces integral to understanding the relationship between the body, time, and sense. In *The Logic of Sense*, by inverting Plato's association of the body with surfaces and ideas with depths, Deleuze reconfigures the surface as the site where sense is produced. At the "incorporeal limit" of the surface, however, sense does not arise merely from bodily causes but as a "surface effect," in the double sense of causation and difference (in the way an optical effect produces a secondary impression distinct from the elements that form it) (7). He writes that "sense, *the expressed of the proposition*, is an incorporeal, complex, and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event which inheres or subsists in the proposition" (19). To show how sense emerges from the surface, Deleuze references the way authors represent a battle:

> they "see" the battle and make their heroes "see" it. But it is above all because the battle *hovers over* its own field, being neutral in relation to all of its temporal actualizations, neutral and impassive in relation to the victor and the vanquished, the coward and the brave; because of this, it is all the more terrible. Never present but always yet to come and already passed, the battle is graspable only by the will of anonymity which it itself inspires. (100)

The sense of the battle does not coincide with its representation but "*hovers over*" it. The temporality of narrative representation prevents the final arrival of sense, which remains in the liminal time of the "never present but always yet to come and already passed." The congealing of sense, its fluidity and expansiveness, arises at the soft membrane between the body's depths and the bewildering infinity beyond the surface: "Sense appears and is played out at the surface . . . in such a way that it forms letters of dust" (133). As in Deleuze's description of the battle, the representation of aging leaves behind something of its becoming as it slides into the past tense of narrative. Yet the sense of aging "*hovers over*" the description. While a focus on reading into the aging of characters makes

aging about something deeper – for example, the sudden appearance of gray hair referring to a character's marital unhappiness – the surface of aging conjures the inarticulate feeling that characters grow older.

Across the Victorian novel, the duration of aging is either represented as a completed process or, when the author abandons realism, accelerated through fantastic means. Paying renewed attention to the surface of aging rather than the depths – to locate the duration of aging with the description rather than structural elements that invisibly constitute it – demonstrates that aging is not a process that occurs behind the scenes, but right in front of us, on us, and in us. While this process is an integral part of life, many would rather not acknowledge it. The modern turn away from aging – to ignore or forget it – culminates in moments of shock, where one suddenly realizes the significance of passing years in a flash. The sudden onset of age (which is, in fact, not sudden at all) arises alongside the novel's emphasis on moments of insight or epiphany. Despite the novel's celebration of the everyday, it channels the reader's attention to crises and revelation, a naturalization of Walter Pater's advice in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* to "burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy" (120). While the novel might seem too prosaic for Pater's momentary aesthetics, the form's paradoxically eventful everyday inspires a major change in the reader's relation to his or her quotidian reality. The duration of aging slides deeper and deeper from the surface of representation, a reality of one's existence that must be excavated for it to appear at all.

Duration and the Discourse of Aging

While the duration of aging fades into the background of realist narrative, the reader still *feels* that characters grow older. In most novels, the characters develop by gaining knowledge through their experiences, and it takes time for these experiences to register a substantial transformation in the character's personality or worldview. Yet this model remains tethered to the assumption that what matters most are deep, tectonic shifts in character. The surface level transformations of processes such as aging remain a superficial background against which these deeper changes occur. Drawing on narrative theory to analyze George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859), I argue that the materiality of discourse – the number, length, and arrangement of printed words on a page – serves as a surface that reflects the reader's duration back to them. While literary criticism often treats the time of reading as an empty byproduct of making sense of a narrative,

I suggest that this duration plays a crucial role in the reading process by entangling the affects of narrative temporality with the aging body of the reader.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette identifies the difficulty of representing the continuity of duration as a "paradox" of subsequent narration: "it possesses at the same time a temporal situation (with respect to the past story) and an atemporal essence (since it has no duration proper)" (223). According to Genette, the duration of narrative is an effect produced by the asymmetry between story and discourse, or the time that passes within the narrative and the time it takes to read. Where the story refers to the content of the narrative, the discourse refers to the formal, linguistic units that compose it. Narrative duration accelerates or slows down according to the variations in rhythm: a narrative can skip ahead twenty years in the span of one line or dilate an instant over the course of thirty pages of description. Thus, when Genette refers to duration he does not mean a unified temporality, but a fractured one that arises at the intersection of story and discourse.

Yet the problem of measurement remains. If narrative temporality arises by juxtaposing story and discourse, there must be some standard that enables the reader to extract a meaningful duration from this relation. For Genette, the reader imports this measurement from his or her lived experience of time, specifically the time of reading itself: "The narrative text," he writes, "has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading" (34). The collision of real and fictional temporalities produces what he calls pseudo-time: one hour passing in the story has meaning because it takes a longer or shorter amount of real time to read. During the process of reading, the narrative's duration takes on existential shape through its relation to the duration of reading itself. It is as if the duration of the text becomes clearer as the reader's own time is obscured by the engrossing act of reading. Rooted in the act of reading, the ability to measure discourse confers temporal legibility on the story.

The entanglement of human time and narrative forms a central question for Paul Ricoeur, who writes in *Time and Narrative* that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (3). For Ricoeur, the reciprocal relation between narrative and human life plays out through a dynamic process of emplotment (as opposed to the fixed structure of plot). Emplotment, or what he calls "mimesis$_2$," is the "configuring operation" that mediates between "mimesis$_1$" and "mimesis$_3$" (53). While mimesis$_1$ constitutes the

prefigured time or social givens before the text, and mimesis$_3$ constitutes the refigured time of the reader after the text, emplotment is the text itself that both shapes and is shaped by the temporal situation that precedes and follows it. Like Genette, Ricoeur asserts that narrative becomes temporally intelligible through the "joint work of the text and reader"; however, Ricoeur places less emphasis on the structural arrangement of linguistic units and more on plot's intervention between the reader and time. Through its ability to draw "a configuration out of a simple succession," Ricoeur claims that emplotment explains how a series of events (x_1, x_2, x_3. . .) coalesces into the unified whole of the text.[3] However, the teleological movement of emplotment from mimesis$_1$ to mimesis$_3$ posits duration as a mere temporal mediator between these representational stages. Placing duration at the center of a theory of emplotment – as interpenetrating rather than linking the different levels of mimesis – causes Ricoeur's model to lose some of its structural lucidity, but greatly enriches his account of the reciprocal feedback between human temporality and narrative.

In order to theorize how duration cuts across the three levels of mimesis – the time of the world, the time of the text, and the time of the reader – I turn to Bergsonian metaphysics, which inverts the ontological privilege of stasis and position by prioritizing movement, process, and becoming.[4] This turn enables an account of narrative and time that departs from the diachronic sequencing of stages toward a synchronic model of expansion and contraction.[5] One of Bergson's most powerful examples of duration takes human aging as its subject. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson writes that growing older does not progress in a series of stages – from an infant, to child, to adolescent, to adult and so on – but arises from "an unbroken continuity between the evolution of the embryo and the complete organism" (18). He examines climacterics like puberty and menopause not as crises that mark the beginning of a new stage, but rather as changes that are "in course of preparation at every instant from birth, and even before birth, and that the aging up to that crisis consists, in part at least, of this gradual preparation. In short, what is properly vital in growing old is the insensible, infinitely graduated, continuance of the change of form" (19). The duration of the human life is not marked by ruptures, whether biological (puberty) or cultural (sixty-five marking retirement age), but shot through in its entirety with past and future qualities. A forty-five-year-old man is just as much the man he was at thirty and the child he was at five. Moreover, he is also just as much the man he will be at fifty-five as the man who will eventually die. As Deleuze