

‘All ages and no age’: Memory, and Self-Narration in Irma Kurtz’s *Then Again: Travels in Search of My Younger Self*¹

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I have walked through many lives
Some of them my own,
And I am not who I was,
Though some principal of being
Abides, from which I struggle
Not to stray.

Stanley Kunitz, “The Layers” (1978)

Abstract:

In her recently published text *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing* (2013) Lynne Segal argues that, in relation to the ageing process “what essentially matters is neither the sociology nor the biology of ageing but the narrative of the self, the stories we tell ourselves” (Segal 2013, 9). Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, suggests that in order to achieve a functioning personal narrative, each individual requires a perspectival mapping of his/her “internal topography” as the past does not simply lie dormant awaiting some form of resurrection but holds the potential for creative collaboration. One recent text which specifically engages with the pivotal role that memory plays in the ageing process and whether it is possible to, as Bollas suggests, “make the past available for the self’s future” (Bollas 1993, 3) is Irma Kurtz’s travelogue/memoir entitled *Then Again: travels in search of my younger self my Younger Self* (2003). Born in New Jersey in 1935 to Eastern European immigrants, Irma Kurtz has written four autobiographical texts, several

1 The phrase “All ages and no age” was originally used by D.W. Winnicott (1986) in *Home is Where We Start from: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (Penguin: Harmondsworth). Qtd. in Lynne Segal, *Out of Time* (London: Verso, 2013) 4.

novels as well as a number of publications related to her long-standing role as 'agony aunt' for *Cosmopolitan* magazine. My reading of Kurtz's *Then Again* will focus not only on Bollas's perspective on what he terms the "psychic signifiers" that are implicitly linked to the creative use of memory and how this concept can be applied to Kurtz's text but also suggests that Stephen Frosh's view on the importance of the achievement of a personal narrative which creatively engages with what he terms the "hauntings" of the past is also relevant to the central thematic concern of *Then Again*. Kurtz's emphasis upon the threads of continuity that enable us to both differentiate and recapitulate past experiences as we experience the crisis of old age, will be specifically linked to the belief expounded by both Frosh and Bollas that ageing represents a multiplicity of continuities over time and how a successful negotiation of the ageing process depends upon an ability to make use of the self as an object of memory that simultaneously is, and is not, equivalent to its present manifestation(s). This article attempts to depict the central roles that memory and narration must play if such possibilities are to be achieved.

Keywords: Kurtz, Memory, Narrative, Ageing, Temporality

In the introductory chapter to Lynn Segal's *Out of Time*, a text which provides a provocative and engaging overview of contemporary trends within ageing studies and literary gerontology, she confides how, at various times when writing the book, she asked herself the question: "why write about ageing when this troubling topic is so daunting, so complicated?" (Segal 2013, 1). Thankfully, the enquiry is of rhetorical significance only, as Segal's suggestive and occasionally polemical journey through current literary, philosophical and theoretical perspectives on ageing provides a compelling narrative regarding how the subject of humanistic gerontology has moved from a position of cultural neglect and disparagement, surviving on the periphery of academic enquiry, to occupying a prominent position within various fields of interdisciplinary study. She also points out that one strategic approach that has acquired increasing visibility within literary gerontology is the acceptance that "what essentially matters is neither the sociology nor the biology of ageing, but the narrative of the self, the stories we tell ourselves" (Segal 2013, 9). Perhaps the most prominent contemporary philosopher who has engaged with the question of the centrality of narrative to the individual subject is Paul Ricoeur, who, in texts such as "Life in Quest of Narrative" (1991), the three volume *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1986, 1988) and *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000) outlines his belief in the dynamic circularity connecting life and narrative. This intersection is, according to Ricoeur, based on the central premise that experience has "a genuine demand for narrative" since "life can be understood only by the stories we tell about it" (Ricoeur 1991, 29). We are inevitably "tangled up in stories that must be recounted" (Ricoeur

1991, 29) and as these stories emerge the implied subject also emerges and narrative identity is constituted. By applying narrative configurations to the story of one's life it becomes possible to construct it into a coherent story that demands attention. Ricoeur maintains that narrative identity is a response to the imperative of integrating both the conditions of change and permanence into a functioning self-image and for this reason he divides identity into the categories of *idem* -corresponding to the condition of continuity and permanence over a lifetime -and *ipse*, which involves the activity of self-reflection and the telling of a life-narrative. This project is facilitated through the deliberate recovery of what Ricoeur terms "memory traces" which serve to trigger a re-examination of the subject's life experiences and the constitution of their narrative identity. He asserts that personal history can be viewed as " a knowledge of traces" which point to " the significance of a passed past that nevertheless remains preserved in its vestiges" (Ricoeur 1988, 120). This "trace" is consequently " something present standing for something past" (Ricoeur 1988, 183) and a mechanism which " invites us to pursue it, to follow it back (Ricoeur 1988, 120). Ricoeur's belief in the inextricable link between the experience of such "traces" and the creation of a coherent narrative identity serves to emphasise how a strong sense of continuity between the events of the past and the life of the present is an essential prerequisite of a genuine narrative identity. His suggestion that the creation of a coherent narrative identity is less about what is lost and more about what remains is intimately linked to his conviction that without autobiographical memory -something which Penelope Lively has termed "a comet trail of completed time" (Lively 2013, 43) – it is impossible to convert the experiences of the past in a manner that provides emotional ballast for both the present and the future.

Such a perspective aligns Ricoeur with some prominent contemporary theorists within the discipline of Psychoanalysis such as Stephen Frosh and Christopher Bollas, who have sought to draw attention to the creative potential of memory in relation to narrative identity. Frosh has written how.

In order to mould time into personal meaning we need to reflect on the contents of our experiences and to filter them through our own sensibility. It is through such processes of self-knowledge that we can arrive at what Paul Ricoeur and other philosophers of the psyche call "a narrative identity" – that is a sense of self which is derived not only from a purely chronological continuity but also from a significant shaping of our own lived story. (Frosh 2013, 115)

Frosh continues by stating how "for the full achievement of a personal narrative, we need a kind of perspectival mapping of our own lived time, a balanced vision of its internal topography"(Frosh 2013, 115) and maintains that in relation to the

subject's experience of the ageing process, the achievement of a personal narrative involves challenging and problematizing the common belief that there exists a simple chronological relationship between past and present and to recognise that ageing is not a simple, straightforward linear process. This suggests that, as we age, we retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all the selves we have been as within our inner world it is possible for all scales and layers of time to exist simultaneously. For Frosh, the 'now' cannot be prised out of the sequence of the immediate past, implying that "we may be, affectively speaking, several ages at once" (Frosh 2013, 110), thereby making it possible to access the past in the psychic flux and mutations of mental life in the present. This implies that, "we can always see continuities across a lifetime, suggesting also that as we age we retain a certain access, consciously or not, to all the selves we have been" (Frosh 2013, 117). In other words, the threads of continuity which enable us to differentiate and recapture past experiences as we negotiate the ageing process accords us access to many different subjectivities or "self-states" through the possible revisiting of our earlier selves. Christopher Bollas similarly contends that "as we age, we are nonetheless inhabited by thousands of inner constellations [and] psychic realities' and maintains that the experiences of the old unfold and collapse back into narratives that are rarely realisable to age itself, but rather reveal themselves in "multiple threads that remain visible" (Bollas 1993, 3). This is a view reiterated by Anca Christofovic who suggests that there is no 'true' older self as such, but only what she terms "permanently fluctuating relationships between younger and older selves" (Christofovic 1999, 271), a perspective corroborated by French psychoanalyst André Green who identifies "the existence of the strange, recurring residues of the past in the present and of the present in our recollections of the past," a condition he refers to somewhat cryptically, as "the heterochrony of psychic temporalities" (Hoffman 2009, 110). For Green, unconscious psychic processes remain 'timeless' as they display a lifelong indifference to forms of temporality and there will always exist some form of temporal vertigo in relation to our experiences of ageing due to the timelessness of the unconscious and the existence of the psychic past within the present.

This increasing interest in the concept of narrative identity within the field of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical theory is perhaps not surprising given that the creation of a coherent narrative identity is inextricably linked to the creative use of memory and as Stephen Frosh has pointed out "In a sense, psychoanalysis started as a theory of memory and its discontents" (Frosh 2013, 97). Bollas defines memories as "underground wells in the deserts of time [...] sources [that] can liberate private experiences and unconscious associations that prevailed in the past" (King 2000, 179). The unpredictable, often digressive and sometimes involuntary processes of affective memory serve to construct a sense of identity

and, as Nicola King claims, the concept of the self which is constructed by these memories is dependent upon the assumptions we have about its function and the kind of access it gives us to the past (King 2000, 67). Memory, in this context, can be viewed as an ever-changing repertoire of possibilities rather than an accurate representation of past events. Bollas claims that memory “makes the past available for the self’s future,” as it “does not lie dormant in the past awaiting resurrection but holds the potential for creative collaboration” (King 2000, 180). Such a perspective suggests a creative alternative to the accepted view of reminiscence as being an indicator of debilitating nostalgia. As Erwin Mortier writes, all too often we categorise memory as something that “threatens to harden into a country house, open on Sunday, from two to five, guided tours on request, please don’t touch anything” (Mortier 2015, 21).

One comparatively recent text which explicitly engages with the pivotal role that memory plays in the ageing process and whether it is possible to, as Christopher Bollas suggests, “make the past available for the self’s future,” is Irma Kurtz’s part memoir, part travelogue, *Then Again: Travels in Search of My Younger Self* (Kurtz 2003). Born in New Jersey in 1935, to parents of Eastern European descent, Kurtz has written four autobiographical texts in addition to a number of publications related to her long-standing role as a so-called ‘agony aunt’ for the well-known *Cosmopolitan* magazine.² *Then Again* relates how, in the summer of 1954, when she was an eighteen-year-old Jewish American teenager studying English Literature at Bernard College in New York, she embarked upon her first trip to Europe on-board the Italian ship *Castel Felice*. While travelling to and from various destinations in Europe by bus, boat and train, Kurtz recorded her myriad impressions in a notebook specially bought for the occasion. More than fifty years later, she discovers the journal hidden in her mother’s closet and decides to retrace the journey that, both literally and figuratively, changed the direction of her life. *Then Again* reproduces the original eighty-three diary entries of varying length – the longest being thirty-two lines and the shortest a mere six words – which began in July 1954 and end at an unspecified date in the same year. The text employs the literary device whereby Kurtz comments upon each of the original diary entries from the vantage point of an ageing expatriate who has lived most of her life in Europe. While these frequently humorous, occasionally caustic and invariably absorbing, ongoing commentaries provide ample

2 Her autobiographical texts, all of which to a greater or a lesser degree engage with the subjects of ageing, gender and cultural ideologies are *The Great American Bus Ride* (1993), *Then Again* (2003), *About Time* (2009) and *My Life in Agony* (2015). Kurtz began her writing career in Paris, producing PR. copy for *The American Army Times* before becoming a founding member of the editorial team of the 1970s magazine *Nova*. She joined the staff of *Cosmopolitan* in 1975.

opportunities for Kurtz to illustrate the naivety and self-absorbed pretensions of her former eighteen-year-old self, her main interest resides in attempting a form of psychological excavation, a desire to question assumptions about the function of memory and the kind of access it gives us to the past. This article argues that the central thematic concern of *Then Again* -which has never been subjected to any academic, critical evaluation- revolves around Kurtz's desire to excavate previous episodes and experiences in her life which possess a potential for the creation of a cohesive narrative identity and how this aim can be fruitfully explored within the conceptual framework of theoretical concepts outlined by Stephen Frosh and Christopher Bollas. These concepts relate specifically to experiences pertaining to "Hauntings" and "Psychic Residues", both of which are perceived by Frosh and Bollas as an intrinsic part of the ageing process and which can provide an alternative to the conventional view of reminiscence as an indicator of escapist nostalgia and a strategy of non-engagement with the external world.

At this juncture it is important to position *Then Again* in relation to current debates within both literary gerontology and contemporary discourses relating to the complex issue of ageing. According to Segal, recent prominent views pertaining to the ageing process tend to privilege two specific narratives, and embody an approach which exemplifies a debilitating binary logic; that is, ageing "badly" and/or ageing "well." In relation to the former perspective, while acknowledging that "being old, honestly old has never been more problematical," Segal bemoans the plethora of literary texts in which an abhorrence of old age is presented as a given and she laments how such texts exemplify "a regressive search for the imaginary unities of youth, the prospect of loss without reparation, absence that cannot become potential presence" (Segal 2013, 29). There exists, in such texts, a disturbing proclivity to conflate the ageing process with a seemingly irreversible decline into physical and spiritual atrophy, a dominant fixation on the trope of the ageing and disintegrating body and a rejection of the diverse distinctiveness and shifting peculiarities of the ageing process. A representative example of this perspective can be found in the words uttered by David Kepash, the central protagonist in Philip Roth's novel *Everyman* who, at one point in the narrative, exclaims "Old age isn't a battle, old age is a massacre" (Roth 2006, 156).

Not surprisingly, such an essentialist depiction of the seemingly inevitable decline in the ageing individual's mental and physical faculties has been increasingly challenged by an equally strident counter-narrative, extolling the virtues of so-called "positive ageing." These so-called "narratives of resistance," challenge the conventional discourse of decline and encompass a broad spectrum of possible approaches; these range from the nuanced life-review research found in Barbara Hernstein Smith's concept of "the Senile Sublime" – where she affirms the link between ageing and creativity in relation to a number of elderly visual

artists (Segal 2013, 53) – to the banal “call to arms” mentality found in popular culture where, with almost insufferable exuberance, we are informed that with due diligence and sheer will power it is possible to subvert, delay and ultimately eradicate the ageing process itself. Such views have become so ubiquitous in various social media that cultural theorist Lauren Berlant has suggested that they have fostered a sensibility defined by what he terms “cruel optimism” (Segal 2013: 228). Equally, Jane Miller, author of the autobiography *Crazy Age* has written how, in the twenty-first century, “It is as if not seeming old is the main achievement the old may decently aspire to” (Millar 2010, 11).³

Kurtz’s text both acknowledges such debates while simultaneously attempting to transcend such material frames of reference. In the opening passages of *Then Again*, Kurtz is refreshingly forthright concerning the motivations behind her seemingly impulsive decision to immerse herself in what she terms “the primitive squiggles” of a journal she has found languishing among the decaying papers, souvenirs and postcards residing in a long-forgotten cardboard box stashed at the bottom of one of her mother’s domestic oubliettes; noting how “As I opened the old notebook and started to read, I wanted more than ever to go back and find her on the deck among the other American Youngsters outward bound for the first time” (Kurtz 2003, 7), her curiosity is predicated on the hope that the journal’s contexts will imaginatively transport her into “a glitch of time,” where the excitement of her first trip abroad can provide a map, a kind of documented pathway, into the events of the past. Acknowledging how “To remember [...] is the final industry of the decrepit imagination” (Kurtz 2003, 46) her conscious act of reclamation can be viewed as an interesting example of what feminist poet and theorist Denise Riley has defined as “retrospective identification” (Segal 2013, 186). According to Riley this involves an attempt to discover the indelible link that connects the metamorphosis of the sensibilities which accrues from the experience of ageing, with recognisable versions of our younger selves. Kurtz’s project of reclamation is undertaken not only with eager anticipation but also trepidation; recognising how “to understand too late is an existential defeat more poignant than remorse” (Kurtz 2003, 335), and aware of how the topology of memory is multi-layered and multidirectional, she confesses to asking herself the question “would I know myself as I was then?” (Kurtz 2003, 17). Such misgivings are quickly supplanted by an urge – expressed obliquely but nevertheless present throughout significant sections of her memoir – to discover whether it is possible to conflate past and present life experiences into a single perception which contains liberatory potential for an ageing woman viewed by the younger generation as “dried up and past desiring” (Kurtz 2003, 9).

3 These narratives are skilfully deconstructed in Catherine Myer’s monograph *Amortality: The Pleasures and Perils of Living Agelessly* (London: Random House, 2011).

Kurtz's (2003) attempt to uncover a cohesive narrative of the self through strategically linking the recorded past as revealed in her notebook with the lived present, immediately encounters the problem of nomenclature. In her commentaries on the original eighty-three journal extracts, she employs numerous forms of address to the eighteen-year-old girl she used to be, many of which exemplify an initial uncertainty regarding her true relationship to the person she refers to as "my younger version" (12). Authorial interjections such as "she and I, me and I, you and I" (9), "the girl who used to be I" (235), "You, my own self" (80), "Young one of me" (204), "little alter I and other ego" (169), reveal how she alternates between feelings of intimate identification with the "girl she used to be," to suggestions of psychic dissonance in relation to the young, occasionally conceited and pompous Irma who sailed on the *Castel Felice*. She invariably negotiates these contrasting responses with a wry humour and enjoys the opportunity to chastise her earlier incarnation's self-importance by adopting the persona of an older, wiser and decidedly worldlier sixty-eight-year-old. Noting how, at the age of eighteen, she was "lacking in self-confidence, lacking in self-awareness and to a great extent lacking in self" (26), she comments that now, as a woman approaching her seventh decade, she "carries an infection hostile to your exuberance and your very life: I am infected with the debilitating and mortal condition of experience" (322). After stating "I am more pessimistic than you, I have lost your faith, little girl, in cures for the worst of what ails human beings" (122), she dutifully acknowledges that such sentiments are provoked by her recent immersion in what she terms "geriatric melancholy," a condition she defines as "a profound and permanent new keynote of old age" (271).

Such commentaries suggest that Kurtz takes a detached and elegantly distanced view of her past life, engaging with, yet at the same time holding herself somewhat aloof from, aspects of her younger self. While this may be broadly true in relation to the first half of the text, which relies heavily upon an ironic contrast between the young Irma and the sixty-eight-year-old writer who revisits her earlier experiences, as the narrative progresses and the author travels to the cities and countries she originally visited in 1954, there is a discernible shift in focus; Kurtz seems less interested in comparing the youthful and inexperienced young girl she once was with the older woman who now "knows a thing or two" (Kurtz 2003, 50), and more inclined to explore the question of whether the distinction between our past and present selves can fruitfully be deconstructed, leaving open the possibility of a type of psychic continuum. This continuum partly manifests itself in the manner by which, for Kurtz, specific memories seem to be preserved and provide access to earlier states of experience which she is able to fleetingly inhabit when these particular memories are evoked. Re-engaging with her journal serves to connect her with what she terms "the ghost," of her younger self,

subjecting her to a form of “haunting” where “ghostly phantoms” (Kurtz 2003, 116) from her past alight into the foreground of her conscious awareness. This ghostly presence impinges itself in the present moment as, within the psyche where “memories flash as vivid as hauntings,” salient and vestigial traces of the past remain ever present.

In relation to the concept of “haunting,” Stephen Frosh, in his influential monograph *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions* (2003), suggests that while on occasions it is conceivable for the future to haunt the present moment – that is, it is possible for the aged individual to be haunted by obscure trepidations as to the inevitable ravages of the future – it is more common that the relentless pressure which comes from unconscious life, leaves us at the mercy of unmediated spectral whispers from the past. Arguing that we are inhabited by inner structures which “can be felt whenever their name is evoked,” Frosh uses the term “haunting” to describe those singular yet repetitive instances “when the-over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises spectres and it alters the experience of time [and] the way we separate the past, the present and the future” (Frosh 2003, 4). Given that the present is always necessarily saturated with both the visual images and literal sounds of memory, this implies “that without a certain degree and kind of haunting, there is no possibility of a present” (Frosh 2003, 2). To quote Frosh:

To be haunted [...] is to be influenced by a kind of inner voice that will not stop speaking and cannot be excised, that keeps cropping up to trouble us and stops us going peaceably on our way. It is to harbour a presence that we are aware of, sometimes overwhelmed by, that embodies elements of past experience and that will not let us be. (Frosh 2003, 29).

He mentions how the temporal disturbance caused by haunting is possibly its key feature, making it unsurprising that the subject routinely employs psychological defences to ward off the “uncomfortable, threatening otherness” we sometimes catch irrefutable glimpses of. However, while the notion of haunting seems to imply that the past’s disturbance of the present is frequently experienced as frightening, according to Frosh it nevertheless entails acts of “continuous [...] creative self-making and the compositions it creates over time [...] are personal and our own” (Frosh 2003, 4). Haunting can therefore serve as a condition of possibility, involving what he terms “a liberatory practice” (Frosh 2003, 41).

In *Then Again*, Kurtz (2003) mentions on several key occasions that she is “haunted” by the ghost of the girl she sometimes affectionately calls “baby sister” and sometimes disdainfully “sugar” or “honey.” She actively solicits a connection with the “young phantom punster at my side” (279), and confides

at the beginning of her narrative how she hopes the re-enactment of her original journey to Europe will facilitate “a stumble into a glitch of time, where the ghost of my ship is forever slipping into port, so [that] from the cliffs above I can look down and see the ghost of myself dancing” (30). Kurtz perceives the evocation of her ghostly travel companion as being linked to the intricate workings of memory, which unfolds into narratives that reveal multiple threads of accessibility. While in Rome, she reveals how “memories, triumphant and quintessential, transformed me there and then into the ghost of myself” (242), and notes how “suddenly an ancient memory grabbed me and pushed me into one of senescent reveries that can make an old lady miss her stop on the journey across places haunted by her younger self” (260). Indeed, on one conspicuous occasion, Kurtz suggests that a *lack* of haunting actually constitutes a greater danger to the subject’s sense of self as this absence creates a “now” which is lacking in depth and personal meaning. While revisiting Cannes, she finds herself searching for recognisable landmarks from her past and remarks, “I found none, not one; nothing appeared even remotely familiar” (287). Nearing panic, she confesses to feeling “invisible, crazy, a ghost lacking genesis and effect” (288). This experience – signified by the loss of a perception of time as a continuum that extends into the past, present and future – tallies with Frosh’s belief that “a lacking of haunting would seem to be a truly precarious and disturbing experience.” (Frosh 2003, 96).

According to Christopher Bollas in his text *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience*, the inadvertent summoning of our “ghostly pasts” is intimately linked to what he describes as “our travel in a rendered world of psychic signifiers” (Bollas 1993, 3). These signifiers, defined by Bollas as “things” or more specifically as “objects” can, when encountered, trigger what he defines as “an inner psychic constellation laden with images, feelings and bodily accuties” (Bollas 1993, 30). Arguing that the true self is not an integrated phenomenon but only “dynamic sets of idiomatic dispositions that come into being through encounters with the object world” (Bollas 1993, 30), he describes how “objects, like words, are there for us to express ourselves” (Bollas 1993, 3), and contends that “we amble about in a in a field of pregnant objects that contribute to the dense psychic textures that constitute self-experience” (Bollas 1993, 30). We can therefore potentially use the lexicon of objects, each of which has a potentially different evocative effect by virtue of its specific form, to initially place and then evoke the ghost of our previous selves. Bollas writes:

Certain objects, like psychic “keys” open doors to unconsciously intense – and rich – experience in which we articulate the self that we are through the elaborating character of our response. This selection constitutes the *jouissance*

of the true self, a bliss released through the finding of specific objects that free idiom to its articulation. (Bollas 1993, 17)

As objects are embodied with what Bollas describes as a “dense psychic texture,” and we constantly endow these objects with a kind of idiomatic significance, it is possible that, long after we have invested an object with importance, we encounter it again and something of the self-experience prevailing at that time is revived. Such objects seem to preserve or provide access to earlier states of being which we fleetingly inhabit when particular memories are evoked. We can, in other words, use actual objects to “walk amidst our own significance,” as, to quote Bollas, “encounters with objects lift us into some utterance of self available for deep knowing” (Bollas 1993, 42).⁴

Interestingly, on several occasions in *Then Again*, Kurtz (2003) reiterates her conviction that particular objects can be endowed with psychic significance and meaning. Confessing that “things more than aid my memory, things contain them” (1), she relates now “countless objects return me instantly to points along the journey and where it all began” (1). A noteworthy example of how a particular memory can exist as a condensation of psychically intense experiences contained in a simple object, occurs when she originally rediscovers the notebook she lost more than fifty years before; when revealing her initial shock at finding the “leather cracked old notebook bound in black library tape”(2), she confesses how “The moment I saw it my breath caught and there I was again eighteen, exultant and trembling on the deck of the Italian ship Castel Felice about to embark on a journey that was going to change my life” (2). On other occasions objects, frequently of the seemingly most banal and unimportant kind, serve as a kind of textual and spatial association to an apparently long forgotten experience. While Kurtz is eating a tasteless lunch in a run-down café on the Isle of Wright, the waitress “plunked a bottle of salad-cream in front of me. And Bang! A whiff of old smoke and river, and there was London as I had first encountered it here in the 1950s” (58). Equally, while in

4 In another contemporary autobiography that deals with the ageing process, Jane Shilling, *The Stranger in the Mirror: A Memoir of Middle Age* (London: Chatto Windus, 2011), she conveys a remarkably similar attitude to objects and haunting as those mentioned by Kurtz in *Then Again*. She writes how, in her later years, “I kept the habit of identifying with certain places and things” (203), and when visiting an old church she used to frequent in her childhood, confesses “To return here was like hearing again faintly the sound of music I’d known a long time ago. Accumulated layers of memory and experience more recent and more vivid had almost obliterated it but then something – a change combination of notes, the mud, the water, the owl on the storm – something woke up that sleeping sense of belonging, somewhere, so intensely that you are the place and the place is you” (166).

Nice, as she begins a somewhat leisurely lunch at a restaurant on the seafront, she “smeared yellow mustard on a piece of baguette and the sting on my tongue returned me immediately to hunger as I had known it in Paris” (272). For Kurtz, it is as if past details become saturated with new meanings which are created through the very act of retrieval itself, and it is suggested that she acquires a specific insight into the nature of self-experience from such intense and evocative moments. On two occasions, Kurtz’s revisiting of an actual geographical space containing objects recognisable from her original visit, triggers a senescent reverie, during which all scales and layers of time could be said to exist simultaneously. These experiences, which seemingly entail a form of psychic realignment and reconfiguration, are profoundly integrative in character and serve to dissolve the emotional distance between the elderly narrator and her younger self. For instance, while in Spain she spends some meditative moments gazing at an ocean she first saw more than fifty years before and relates how; “It was then, in the moments of a Spanish sunset when time shifts gears and friction is suspended, in these silken moments, you became I, child” (217). Equally, when approaching the Vatican, she “remembered being you in just that place fifty years before; I felt your delight, you pure untested strength. And for a moment I felt the wonder and thrill of beginning” (242). The possibility to access and relive earlier experiences such as wonder and joy – even if only momentarily – can be viewed as providing generative possibilities out of which newness can emerge. Frosh has described such moments as “experiences of momentary disappearance in which the subject comes back fundamentally changed” (Frosh 2011, 3), and they serve as strategic pointers to how it is indeed possible to conflate past and present into one unified perception and be, literally rather than figuratively speaking, “all ages and no age.”

These visionary moments problematize any simple chronological relation between past and present and imply, as Lynne Segal has done, that “we may be, affectively speaking, several ages at once” (Segal 2013, 12). Such experiences also suggest that the process of ageing is less about what is lost and more about what actually remains, and provide a potential strategy for evoking the psychic residues of the past in a way that, as Bollas suggests, makes the past available for the self’s future. While Erwin Mortier claims that “we hang motionless, impotent, between what we don’t want to remember and what we can’t bear to see” (Mortier 2015, 18). Kurtz’s text intimates that successful ageing depends upon our ability to make use of the self as an object of memory, as it is “only in old people [that] memory can achieve its art and apogee.” If memory represents, as Walter Benjamin claims, “the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been” (King 2000, 19), it can also deepen into what is virtually a new emotion

and provide an opportunity for creative collaboration. Kurtz certainly suggests as much when by informing us of how she intends to live her life after vacating the apartment she has lived in for more than twenty years, in order to move into a new studio flat: "So what will I do in this new life and new space? I will remember, I will repeat myself, saying old things in new ways, saying new things drawn from aged perception" (Kurtz, 2003, 247).

It can be argued therefore that *Then Again* can be viewed as entailing a reconfiguration of Kurtz's life narrative through the recovery of, and immersion in, memories that trigger a re-reading and re-examination of her past experiences. Her creative engagement with the "psychic residues" and "hauntings" of the past facilitates a dismantling of the conventional discourse which views old age as essentially defined by the experience of decline. Kurtz's refusal to comply with our jejune society's neglect and scorn of "antique" memories, a stance which amounts to what she herself refers to as "a passive theft of each life's final treasure" (Kurtz 2003, 253) is perhaps the predominant reason why *Then Again: Travels in Search of My Younger Self*, is such a welcome addition to the burgeoning field of literary memoirs of ageing. As she herself candidly states: "where is there a library anywhere in the world as well stocked with cautionary volumes for the young as an experienced old memory?" (Kurtz 2009, 180).

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