As so often happens with psychologists, it was literary work that gave me my first inkling of the "biological texture" of aging. It was a "novel" by Rainer Maria Rilke that set me off: The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge (Rilke 1984). The grandfather of its title figure, Christof Brigge, a feisty old aristocrat, wants "a death of his own", wants to arrange its *mise en scene*, even to choose the cast of characters to be onstage. It was to be a continuation of life, his life, with the act of dying no less an artifice than living itself? The novel—like Rilke's more famous "Duino Elegies"—is, of course, about creating realities, about creating the stuff of life itself (Rilke 1982). It is laced with odd, often disturbing imagery, like that of the seated woman, poor and frightened, with her face buried in her hands while collecting her thought. So surprised is she by the approaching footsteps of the narrator that "The woman took fright and was torn too quickly out of herself, too violently, so that her face remained in her two hands (p. 7)." Malte Laurids keeps his eyes glued to the inside of the face in her hands, and does not dare look at "the naked flayed head with a face" (p. 7). What is this nakedness he fears?

I do not think often about Rilke's novel, though in the year or two after reading it, it came often to mind. Nor do I return to it as often as I do, say, to Melville's *Billy Budd* or Conrad's *Secret Sharer*. I'm not sure whether it's because I do not want to soften the "shock of the new" that its first and only full reading created, or because that initial shock was quite enough. By the time my mind had settled, though, I'd come up with my version of what Rilke was trying to say.

It was this. A life is a work of art, probably the greatest one we produce. It is not simply art in the *living*. For we do not live our lives in any naked sense, save when we are caught aback and leave our faces behind. Rather, the art is in the *telling*—the telling after the fact to ourselves and others. But it is *not* a fiction, life, nor is it, for that matter, the real thing. It is some amalgam of the two—both theater and what theater's about.
It wasn’t until some years later that I began to get a somewhat clear view of this odd sense in which life imitates drama—thanks to reading Kenneth Burke (1945). Just as dramatic fiction is composed of Agents performing Acts to achieve various Goals through the deployment of varyingly appropriate Means in Settings that impose constraints and afford opportunities—the famous Burkean pentad—so life itself can be composed in that way. But since, as Kierkgaard famously put it, we live life forward but understand it backward, it is in that backtracking that we impose dramatic structure. And not just for the sake of drama itself. For this is the very process by which we construct Self, the central figure in this work of art. No story, no self.

But as Kenneth Burke and many others since (Labov and Waletzky 1967) have reminded us, a story can function as such only if there is some disturbance or imbalance between its Agent, Act, Goal, Means, and Setting—an imbalance that creates the engine of the story: I call it Trouble. Story typically begins with a steady state of some kind: something canonical, expectable. It heats up when the expectable is violated, thrown into an imbalance of its components. That violation or disruption sets in motion whatever acts can be taken to restore the original canonical state. If those acts fail and that state is not restored, we are compelled to find a new order, a “turning point.” And when we are done with the telling, the story ends with a coda that makes it possible to get on with ordinary “forward living” by fixing it “backward.”

What’s so compelling about “life” as a story is that it combines within it a long train of component, more episodic stories that then are shaped into an amalgam that we refer to as “a life as-a-whole.” In fact, as I’ve commented elsewhere (Bruner and Kalmar in press), we usually go about this “life-as-whole” construction rather lackadaisically, sporadically, and segmentally. It is hard work, the “well inspected life,” and besides, too fixed an account might rob us of subsequent opportunities. I suspect too that working with high concentration on our life stories often reveals too much about our impotence or fecklessness as narrators of Selfhood. Perhaps that’s why it’s easier with a therapist.

It was in the light of this vulnerability that I found Malte Laurids Brigge so daring, so foolhardy, so intriguing, so shocking. A brave man! But somehow, a Northern European one. For cultures also vary in the kinds of narrative templates they provide for helping people shape the drawn-out “stories of their lives” (Rorty 1976). The more I’ve thought about it, the more convinced I’ve become that these narrative templates need to be works of art—whether Malte Laurids Brigge, whether Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman, whether Tennessee Williams’ Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Somehow, “how-to-do-its” don’t serve—but that topic takes us too far from the subject at hand.

I’ve tried elsewhere to spell out in more detail most of the points I’ve touched on in the foregoing, and it would be pointless trying to compress them further here (Bruner 1990, 1997; Bruner and Kalmar in press). I want to close, rather, with some speculations about “life-telling” and the processes of aging—more by way of offering hypotheses than conclusions. I can warrant no credentials for doing so save, perhaps, two. The first is a heavy credential, if not a trustworthy one: I have spent many years exploring and analyzing life narratives, beginning with a study of the autobiographies of refugees who had fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, (Allport, Bruner and Jandorf 1941) (I had the great fortune of assisting Gordon Allport in this work.) and most recently studying the interlocking life-stories of five members of the same family (Bruner 1990). It is a pursuit that evokes lots of conjectures! The second credential is scarcely to be taken seriously, though it may not be irrel-
evant. Within the coming fortnight, I shall reach my eighty-second birthday. So at least, I have “been there.”

Here are some extravagant hypotheses, and they are connected: (1) Willingness or eagerness to “story” one’s life is tantamount to the desire to live—even when the story is flavored with disaster. Indeed, if the story is trouble-free, it is likely to run out, to bring on death. (2) Leaving deadly viruses, bacteria, and faulty genetic architecture aside, the fullness and length of a life depends upon the self-credibility and “precedent” value of the running narrative that one keeps telling oneself “after the fact.” I do not mean “precedent” in the narrow sense of stare decisis, but rather in the sense of the past providing some basis for the present being as is. (3) Successful aging is a form of psychosomatic health, the somatic aspect of which is still little understood—though it may turn out to be nothing more complicated than that appropriately forward-tuned narratives stimulate T-cells to “do in” invading pathogens. The “psycho” aspect of psychosomatic health may inhere in the sense of still to be finished business that a life-story supplies. (4) Since it is in the nature of cultures that they vary in the genres of aging narratives they provide, one would expect to find distinctive aging patterns cross-culturally. Most cultures one might suspect, have on offer narratives that both denigrate aging and that honor or enable it. Which genre any particular individual in any particular culture adopts as a template for his own life story is partly a function of social position, and partly a function of luck (res ipse loquitur!). So, for example, Justices of higher courts, it seems, are both well placed and lucky in their tasks: as with Oliver Wendell Holmes writing his last Supreme Court opinion at 92 at the start of this century, and Sir Frederick Pollock in the middle of the last century being an intractable thorn in the side of injustice into his mid-80s as Lord Chief Baron of the Exchequer.

REFERENCES