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## **“The Mark on the Floor”**

Alice Munro on Ageing and Alzheimer’s Disease in *The Bear Came Over the Mountain* and Sara Polley’s *Away From Her*

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In Italy, as well as in most European countries, alarm over Alzheimer’s does not seem to be as obsessive as it is in North America, perhaps with the exception of the UK, where echoes of the medical research and media campaign conducted in Anglophone cultural contexts are certainly wider: “Americans now fear Alzheimer’s more than any other disease, even cancer, according to a survey from MetLife.” (Goldman 2017: 4)

In spite of the fact that ageing studies are gaining attention and are gathering academic strength and rigorous scientific scrutiny, the main preoccupation in Italy/Europe seems to be about the increasing number of elderly people, also due to a decreasing birth rate, and the general sanitary, sociological and political consequences of such a demographic turn:

It seems reasonable to assume that the growing numbers of very old people will increase the numbers of physically dependent people, with a resultant increase in costs, especially arising from their need for care due to ill health. (Thane 2000: 483)

*The Bear Came over the Mountain* by the Canadian short story writer Alice Munro (*The New Yorker* 1999), taken as an emblematic literary representation of such a social change and its consequences in the Canadian context (“by 2021 the number of Canadians with dementia will rise to

592,000” – CSHA, 1994) (Johnson & Krahn 2010: 1), was translated into Italian in 2003. After the release of its film adaptation by the Canadian director Sarah Polley, *Away from Her* (2006), the short story, almost a novella, became popular and even more so after Munro received the Nobel Prize in 2013.

The ascending success of this literary/cinematic work shows how the new millennium is indeed the temporal frame for our becoming more and more conscious of ageing-related social consequences.

A close, textual scrutiny of this carefully constructed short story with reference to its film adaptation can help detect whether this masterful representation of old age, Alzheimer’s disease and disability, still grants agency, free will and dignity to the ageing person and what kind of responsibility it places on the care-giver.

### **“THE MARK ON THE FLOOR”**

The temporally layered short story *The Bear Came over the Mountain* (*New Yorker* 1999; 2001) by Alice Munro opens with a flash back, a short paragraph written in the past tense and by an extradiegetic, omniscient narrator, briefly describing Fiona in her youth, in her parents’ house, in her University years, including Grant’s courtship. Fiona is the first word in the story, the subject of the first paragraph. She is the protagonist, although Grant has a similarly relevant role, for this is a story about a married couple. She is the one who proposed to get married, at Port Stanley, Ontario, on Lake Erie’s beach, and Grant eagerly accepted for “he wanted never to be away from her. She had the spark of life” (Munro 2001: 274). Thus, from the very beginning Fiona appears as a woman of will and agency, capable of freedom of choice and initiative. It is also interesting to notice that Southern Ontario and provincial life have always been at the centre of Munro’s literary representations. Fiona and Grant live there, near Georgian Bay.

After a few lines, although the narrative insists on the past tense, the action moves to a moment closer to the present. Past and present, analepsis and prolepsis, are only the first of a long series of binaries and opposites on which the plot structurally stands. Time, moreover, is a much more flexible category in the text, due to ellipsis, time-shifts, and various other strategies.

Among other parallels, there are the things that Fiona forgets or cannot forget and the things that Grant forgets or pretends to forget. Moreover, sometimes the binaries create a cross over and Marlene Goldman rightly observes that chiasmatic reversals rather sustain the short story (2017: 294).

Just before they left their house, Fiona noticed a mark on the kitchen floor. It came from the cheap black house shoes she had been wearing earlier that day.

"I thought they'd quit doing that," she said in a tone of ordinary annoyance and perplexity, rubbing at the grey smear that looked as if it had been made by a greasy crayon.

She remarked that she'd never have to do this again, since she wasn't taking those shoes with her.

"I guess I'll be dressed up all the time," she said. "Or semi-dressed up. It'll be sort of like in a hotel." (Munro 2001: 274)

At this stage, the reader does not know yet where Fiona and Grant are going. Thus, what seems to be the present moment, reveals itself, in fact, as a flash forward. For this passage alludes to the very moment Fiona leaves their house and moves to a private clinic to spend there her last days, for she suffers from Alzheimer's and she is still in the stage when she can decide about her own future. Above all, she does not want to be a burden to Grant. In this respect, Fiona shows a strong agency and seems to incarnate the values which were the rule in ancient times. The point Cicero made in 44 BC is a timeless one:

*"Ita enim senectus honesta est, si se ipsa defendit, si ius suum retinet, si nemini emancipate est, si usque ad ultimum spiritum dominatur in suos."*

Old age will only be respected if it fights for itself, maintains its own rights, avoids dependence on anyone, and asserts control over its own to the last breath. (Johnson & Thane 1998: 38)

In the film, Fiona's strength and firmness of mind is stressed by her attempt to reassure Grant that he is not taking this decision alone. In fact, they are deciding together, or better, she has made up her mind, also thanks to the specialized medical literature she is reading: quite scary about the burden cast on the care-giver, it must be added (Mace 1982; Shenk 2001). Grant



feebly protests that this solution might be considered only temporary, a sort of experiment, a rest cure.

Yet, the passage about the mark on the floor is interesting also for another reason. What is relevant is that Fiona engages herself in erasing the mark her slippers left on the floor. That mark is a clear sign of her presence in their house. Symbolically, then, it is a sign of her treading on the ground, on this Earth, in her house as well as in Grant's life. What she is doing is erasing not only the trace of herself (a metonym), but her whole self from the very house she has inhabited with Grant for a life. She is un-writing her own life-story, her physical presence, for the mark looks like a sign made by a crayon on a board, like the written sign on a page. Thus, while Alice Munro starts writing the first paragraphs of her story, Fiona is starting erasing it, for she is about to leave her story/house/life. In passing, it is worth mentioning that to Virginia Woolf "The mark on the wall" became the pre-text to figure out and conjure up a whole short fiction, by recollecting how she shaped that mark with her observer's phantasies and conjectures, till war is cursed, right before pronouncing a final trivial revelation: "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail" (Woolf 1991: 89).

In Munro's story, the first iconic image we have of Alzheimer's – for the metaphor of the erasure of the mark on the floor has more layers – is an erasure of signs, marks, traces, as if the illness could bring us back to a *tabula rasa*, a blank board, first deleting our signs, then ourselves. Fiona's absence will be the absence of her signs.

Fiona will then be leaving the house. She might have ignored that mark or indulged with it, leaving it behind for Grant to clean, or for time to erase it. On the contrary, she deliberately erases it after her passage, not to leave traces of her self behind her and beyond her. Once accomplished that gesture, the gesture of a housewife, Fiona dresses up, puts on her red lipstick and leaves the house: "She looked just like herself on this day – direct and vague as in fact she was, sweet and ironic." (Munro 2001: 275) These four epithets, like a painter's touches of colours, characterize Fiona. Yet, irony is her most striking feature. Indeed, she always faces her illness with irony, playing with words, answering "flippantly" as she admits to the doctor and to the policeman who diagnose and ascertain her status. Quite strikingly, Fiona has always the last word, she is never intimidated by questions, and she has answers that do make sense in a way.

The film – which is by no means considered here in terms of “faithfulness” – by the Canadian director Sarah Polley, *Away from Her* (2006), is the short story transposition and adaptation for cinema. It starts with a brief sequence on a close-up of Grant driving his car towards an address scribbled on a piece of paper: “Paris, Ontario”. From that moment onwards, the film patently shows its agenda of Canadianness. Another crucial example of the film as a Canadian cultural product is the intimate moment when Grant is reading the poem by Michael Ondaatje’s *The Cinnamon Peeler* to Fiona. From a well-recognizable paperback edition, he quotes the well-known stanza: “This is how you touch other women ... .” (Ondaatje 1989: 157) It alludes to infidelity, another important theme in the plot, hinting at the momentary diversions of Grant’s life from Fiona’s side (Rodríguez Herrera 2013: 110). It is true, however, that other intertextual references are relevant as well, as the reference to Auden’s *Letters from Iceland*, for Iceland is an elsewhere all through the narrative (Szabó 2008). Indeed, Iceland does not only provide a background to Grant’s profession, as professor of Nordic mythology and skaldic poems, but it is Fiona’s ancient motherland, the land of love and be-longing for “love is home-sickness”, in Freudian words, that is, the land/body of the Mother (1919: 15). It is also a young land, geologically speaking, still ‘sparking’ with volcanic life, yet incapable of giving Fiona eternal youth. In the film, Grant complains with the nurse that his wife is far too young for Alzheimer’s. This reference to Iceland calls to mind what the American scholar, Robert Pogue Harrison writes:

My body is at once sixty years old and several billion years old, since all of its atoms originated a few seconds after the Big Bang, hence are as old as the universe itself. Moreover, a body does not age uniformly in all its parts. The age of a weak heart is not that of a sound kidney. One may turn old in one part of the body and stay young in another over the course of years. (Harrison 2014: 8)

As for Fiona, her belonging to a young Land, makes her young, from a geological point of view. Yet, she is also very old, for her origins date back to the Vikings and their legends. Fiona is also as old as the Goddess Friia, as Héliane Ventura writes (2010: 8), for we are as old as “the archetypes of prehistoric myth” (Harrison 2014: 8). She is getting older in one part of her

body, before slowly declining physically. This does not prevent her from being an inspiring Muse all her life.

At the beginning of the film, there is a close up of Fiona's face as a young girl, with Grant's voiceover, reminiscent of when she proposed to him. Then, there follows a long sequence with Fiona and Grant cross-country skiing, while the titles start appearing. This sequence is particularly meaningful and symbolic, for it seems to lyrically translate and refer back to the opening of the literary text.

On a flat, white, unlimited expanse of snow, Fiona and Grant go skiing at first following parallel paths. Then, Fiona keeps on skiing straight on, while Grant – once left behind – diverges from her for a while, and they both move separately towards a far-away horizon of silhouetted, low and black hills. Subsequently, they re-unite and go back skiing towards their house.

What can be taken for an afternoon spent practicing sports is, in fact, a symbol of life itself. Grant and Fiona have proceeded together as husband and wife in their parallel life, yet an unexpected destiny has crossed their paths, and soon Fiona will have to leave, her path will diverge from that of Grant, as in the past Grant had distracted himself from her, luckily without consequences for their married life. The tracks they leave in the snow, well-marked as if on a white board, are symptomatic of their paths/passage in life.

Our field of vision, as film spectators, as well as the two actors's field of vision, coincide with the snowy field, and the field is a clear metaphor for life itself. "Field" is a key term in psychoanalysis: it implies a shared space, a game to play together (to "dream together"), a place to be cultivated, but also to be transformed constantly. It is the space of the analytic relationship. "The field in front of one", Berger claims, "seems to have the same proportions of one's life" (Berger 1980: 262; Lingiardi 2016: 83-84).

This white expanse of snow – an oblique reference to Iceland – might also be considered a metaphor for memory, where our life experiences are stored as traces, signs, marks that Alzheimer's might affect, for these memories can easily be deleted. The skiing sequence placed at sunset is also symbolic, for it alludes to the ending of life, and to the coming of dusk that erases the landscape by slowly enveloping it in darkness. In the film,

Fiona and Grant stop for a moment to admire, absorb and ponder on the fading light of the day, and perhaps on the ending of their lives.

There is a further reference in the story to a swampy place the couple drives by while on their way to the clinic, and Fiona suddenly remembers: "She was talking about the time that they had gone out skiing at night under the full moon and over the black-striped snow." (Munro 2001: 278) Here, too, the moon projects its light on the white expanse and the tracks on the snow are like black marks on a white board. In this way, the text creates a consistent net of recurrent references, all insisting on the memory of signs and on the erasing of those same signs.

On the contrary, the film here takes a different turn, for Fiona reminds Grant of the Brant Conservation Area and the flowers they saw there, as if they visited the place in spring, while the text says that only in winter, with thick ice, it is possible to walk there. The flowers, skunk lilies, are typical of that latitude and it is indictment of the film purpose to strictly relate to an Ontario imaginary and a strong sense of Canadianness, for it aims at distancing itself from American and Hollywood productions. In the film, Fiona's irony reaches its peak when she answers to the doctor: "we don't go very often now to the movie theatre, all those multiplex showing all that American garbage" (my transcription), when asked what she would do in case she spotted a fire in a cinema.

It must be said that flowers, too, like animals, constitute one among many leitmotifs in the text; when Grant goes to visit Fiona for the first time, in February, he buys some Narcissus while pondering that it is the first time in his life he buys flowers to Fiona, like one of those husbands who have reasons to make themselves forgiven. As soon as he arrives at the clinic, he is met by the nurse's comment – in the film it is the hateful supervisor's comment: "Wow. Narcissus this early. You must have spent a fortune." (Munro 2001: 286) The cost of Narcissus must be nothing if compared to the fees due to the clinic, and to add more irony, it is perhaps not too early, but too late for Grant to bring flowers to his wife. She might not recognize either him or his gesture. The bluebirds painted on the nameplate at the door look kitsch to Grant and, indeed, he does not even find Fiona in her room and is compelled to roam through the corridors with Narcissus in his hands, till the nurse puts them in a vase. Grant could even be identified with the mythical figure of Narcissus, while Fiona, once in the clinic transforms

herself into the nymph Echo, for she repeatedly insists on offering Grant “a cup of tea”, or on claiming he is “persistent”.

“On this day” (Munro 2001: 275) is the deictic indicating the present moment in the story, when Fiona takes the final decision and all arrangements have already been made for her retirement and her separation from Grant. Thus, the story must once again go back to the past, through a flashback.

Over a year ago, Grant had started noticing so many little yellow notes stuck up all over the house. That was not entirely new. Fiona had always written things down [...] The new notes were different. Stuck onto the kitchen drawers – Cutlery, Dish towels, Knives. Couldn’t she just open the drawers and see what was inside? (Munro 2001: 275)

In this passage Fiona is still described by the extra-diegetic, omniscient narrator – who nevertheless adopts an internal focalizer: Grant. Sticking up notes on kitchen drawers has been suggested by Fiona’s fear of forgetting where things are, but they also show how she is having problems in connecting signifier and signified. The graphic symbols which also correspond to sonic signifiers, need to be attached to the signified, to the real, material objects they represent, in order to be recognized by Fiona. On the one hand, this might be an intertextual literary reference, for in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Aureliano Buendia marks every single object with its name for the sake of his father who is forgetting everything. However, he starts thinking that perhaps one day people will only know inscriptions but lose the sense of the objects’ function and use. Thus, the final question asked at the end of the quoted passage – “Couldn’t she have just opened the drawers and seen what was inside?” (Munro 2001: 275) – seems to allude to a similar situation, where the use of the object is lost and not only the word that names it. Moreover, the question is asked in a neutral tone that seems to embody Roland Barthes’s “middle voice” (1989: 18-19), for the narrator speaks with the voice of Grant.

Thus, Fiona is ill, she does not necessarily forget, but above all she cannot match signifier and signified, she cannot reach the unity of the linguistic sign anymore. Now, if the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary and artificial, Fiona’s loss of words would not be a

problem. For, after all, if we exchange the names of forks and spoons, the two objects would continue to operate as tools with inverted functions. The problem lies in the usage and social conventions to which we all should conform. Apparently, every coupling of concept and sound-image is a word. It follows that language, as a system of relations between words, is internal to the mind. This is what Ingold writes about Saussure's linguistic theory (2016: 120). Thus, Fiona's illness becomes problematic not so much because it allows her to take some freedom in arbitrary re-combinations of words and objects, signifier and signified, but because it is an illness of the mind, which breaks socially and historically established (linguistic and cognitive) conventions. As Derrida would say, by visualising Saussure's notion of the sign as a page with two faces (signifier and signified), Fiona has stopped living within the logocentric / phonocentric logic. She cannot coordinate her mind with her voice (Derrida 1976: 12).

In the short story, immediately after the question about the cutlery, there is a passage that does not seem to fit into the narrative. In fact, it corroborates the signifier vs signified split:

He remembered a story about the German soldiers on border patrol in Czechoslovakia during the war. Some Czech had told him that each of the patrol dogs wore a sign that said *Hund*. Why? Said the Czechs, and the Germans said, Because that is a *hund*.

He was going to tell Fiona that, then thought he'd better not. They always laughed at the same things, but suppose this time she didn't laugh? (Munro 2001: 275)

This anecdote is completely out of place in this context. The only reason why it might fit, is exactly the endorsement of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, for we perfectly know from linguistics that to the same signified a different signifier is matched in the various languages (eng. "dog", fr. "*chien*", it. "*cane*", ger. "*hund*"). Later on, we learn that Fiona had two dogs as a substitute for the children she could not have. Thus, dogs are a recurrent element giving cohesion to the story.

A problem arises from the subsequent question. Why should Fiona laugh or not laugh at this anecdote? Who are those "some Czech" Grant refers to? The short story is characterized by ellipses and elisions, much remains unsaid, not only between husband and wife, but also between the narrator – who seems to speak through Grant – and the reader.

In contrast, the film produces an explanation for these interrogatives, by re-proposing the anecdote. It is Fiona telling the little story to Grant. She claims she heard it from Veronica, a former Czech student of his, with whom he might have flirted or even have had an affair. Thus, in the film, the director seems to underline how Fiona is perfectly conscious of what is happening to her. She has to watch the word-label in order to identify the object/signified. More dramatically, in the film Fiona affirms she fears she is going to disappear.

A similar split of the linguistic sign occurs in the novel *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2012) by the Cino-Canadian novelist Madeleine Thien, which is partly dedicated to Alzheimer's. A young Cambodian researcher and her Japanese boss work in a research lab for the study of Alzheimer's. A woman comes to Dr. Hiroji:

Elie was fifty-eight years old when she began to lose language. She told Hiroji that the first occurrence was in St. Michael's Church in Montreal, when the words of the Lord's Prayer, words she had known almost from the time she had learned to speak, failed to materialize on her lips. For a brief moment, while the congregation around her prayed, the whole notion of language diminished inside her mind. Instead, the priest's green robes struck her as infinitely complicated, the winter coats of the faithful shifted like a collage, a pointillistic work, a Seurat: precision, definition, and a rending, rending beauty. The Lord's Prayer touched her in the same bodily way that the wind might, it was the sensation of sound but not meaning. She felt elevated and alone, near to God and yet cast out.

And then the moment passed. She came back and so did the words. A mild hallucination, Elie thought. *Champagne in the brain*. (Thien 2012: 10-11; original emphasis)

Elie is a retired biomechanical engineer and she now dedicates herself to painting. Her final, ironic consideration about "champagne in the brain" is very similar to Fiona's initial playful awareness that she is only "losing her mind". This apparent light heartedness, or irony, in defining one's symptoms has to do with what Marlene Goldman reminds us:

The oldest known appearance of the term "dementia" – which is primarily a group of symptoms, rather than a disease – was in Roman texts, where it meant "being out of one's mind." (Goldman 2017: 13)

Loss of language, seen here as a momentary failure, does not widen the distance from God, for any form of prayer might be acceptable in a church, but it does widen the distance from men – “near to God and yet cast out” – for words are a social convention not a private religious act. As we know from Ferdinand de Saussure:

If the Frenchman of today uses words like *homme* (‘man’) and *chien* (‘dog’) it is because these words were used by his forefathers. Ultimately there is a connection between these two opposing factors: the arbitrary conventions, which allow free choice, and the passage of time, which fixes that choice. It is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other laws than that of tradition, and because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary. (Saussure 1983: 85-86)

In the film, Fiona produces a couple of slips of the tongue. The first time, this happens during a dinner in the company of another couple. Fiona takes the bottle in her hand and when she is about to pour its content in the glasses, she asks: “Would you like some wane, wine, ween?” The embarrassed guests think they have to indulge with her, and answer back “Why not, some wane!” (my transcription).

Another relevant moment, actually the most touching in the whole story, and literally re-proposed in the film, occurs when Grant goes to visit Fiona and brings Aubrey – an ex temporary patient – back to her, in the hope that she might benefit from re-enacting their affective relationship and so improve her conditions. She embraces Grant and says: “You could have just driven away. Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken.” (Munro 2001: 321)

This almost childish attempt at reciting the paradigm of an irregular verb, according to the basic English mnemonic approach to conjugations, shows how Fiona knows exactly what she wants to say, only she does not find the right sonic signifier, the right word. But she has recognized Grant, to the point of pinching his earlobes, a loving gesture they only know too well from their married life.



## **AFTER “DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH”: THE NEW INSTITUTION**

The clinic where Fiona choses to retire, Meadowlake, is known to her and Grant for in the past they used to pay visits to an old neighbour there, but now the newly restored building looks completely rehabilitated. Thus the short story deploys the strategy of comparing a past gothic-like description of an institution dating back to the fifties (pre-anti-asylum movement) where old people were dumped and disposed of, to a present institution modelled on new standards:

[Past:]

There had been some unnerving sights: whiskers on old women's chins, somebody with a bulged-out eye like a rotten plum.

Dribblers, head wagglers, mad chatterers.

[Present:]

Some people were sitting along the walls, in easy chairs, others at tables in the middle of the carpeted floor. None of them looked too bad. Old – some of them incapacitated enough to need wheelchairs – but decent.

Now it looked as if there'd been some weeding out of the worst cases. (Munro 2001: 287)

Definitely, the gothic sights of illness, of which Marlene Goldman gives a precise historical and cultural scrutiny, has been turned into a decent image of human beings in a new phase of their life. Only the narrator/Grant's allusion to “weeding out the worst cases” remains attached to the gothic vision of people disposed of against their will. In fact, it is said later on that the worst cases are hidden behind locked doors, on the second floor of the building, where Fiona, too, is threatened to go, should her conditions worsen. That is the place for mentally disturbed people, too. Thus, in the text the new clinic, in spite of its luminous appearance, its greenery, its efficient staff manager, seems only a white-washed copy of the old one. The narrator, through the internal focalizer, has Grant voicing his scepticism and his sarcastic comments on the clinic. He cannot forget what the clinic was like in the past and he remains attached to that stereotype.

First, the institution is characterized by rules, and they are particularly hateful: “nobody could be admitted to Meadowlake during the month of

December. The holiday season had so many emotional pitfalls.” (Munro 2001: 278) Therefore, Fiona will be admitted in early January. The second rule concerns the fact that during the first month of permanence, patients cannot receive visitors, even close or loved relatives. After one month on their own, they are settled in, claims the efficient supervisor, and “they are as happy as clams” (Munro 2001: 279),<sup>1</sup> she adds in a matter of fact voice. The choice of this idiom unintentionally shows a certain lack of humanity pervading this clinic, where emotions and feelings are banned and where the happiness of clams alludes to invertebrates, whose happiness is perhaps limited if it is proportional to their lack of mobility.

Moreover, clams as mussels are imprisoned in their shells. Thus, the institution figuratively sees itself as a prison, limiting the movement, the emotional life and the freedom of its patients. In this respect the clinic is not different from the Foucaultian type of institutions for total control of bodies and souls (Foucault 1977: 135-169). In spite of appearances the biopolitics of total control remains substantially the same, although critics have different opinions, seeing the clinic as a positive ‘elsewhere’ (Jamieson 2014; Johnston & Rao 2018: 17).

Grant is then informed that Fiona’s adaptation process is defined by the nurse as if she were “coming out of her shell. What shell was that? Grant wanted to ask [...]” (Munro 2001: 281).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the metaphor recurs here, too, textually reinforcing the idea that patients, once there, inevitably lose their vitality. Although, it must be said that animals are frequently mentioned all through the short story as Héliane Ventura claims by precisely mapping their presence (Ventura 2010: 4).

The film, quite successfully and also updating the story to the present, increases the gap between the supervisor or staff manager, Ms Madeleine Montpellier, with her French sounding surname and her super-efficient attitude, and Kristy, the kind and sympathetic nurse. In the short story, Kristy is a blond nurse with “voluminous, puffed-up hair” (Munro 2001: 286), coiffed according to the fashion of the seventies. On the contrary, but

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1 “As happy as a clam”: well pleased, quite contented. US colloq. *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. III, 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 263.

2 “Out of one’s shell”: in figurative phrases referring to “emerge into life”. *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. XV, 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 230.

very realistically, in the film she is a modest black haired nurse, probably belonging to a minority ethnic group, with a problematic family life; thus showing the internal hierarchies in contemporary clinics or hospitals.

At a later stage, when Fiona's conditions seem to worsen and she does not recognize Grant any more, Grant notices that she is wearing a cheap pullover, not of the kind Fiona used to wear. Fiona used to be a very elegant woman with "hair that was as light as milkweed fluff":

It must be that they didn't bother to sort out the wardrobes of the women who were roughly the same size and counted on the women not to recognize their own clothes anyway. They had cut her hair, too. They had cut away her angelic halo. (Munro 2001: 297)

When Grant has the chance to talk to his wife, he uses the subtler and accusatory expression "Why did they chop off your hair?", and Fiona answers nonchalantly "Why – I never missed it" (Munro 2001: 297). Yet, the phrasal verb "chop off" alludes to a careless attitude, a rough and approximate gesture that does not take into consideration the dignity of a styled haircut for patients. It is clear that Grant has neither trust nor sympathy for such an institution, where patients are conceived of as passive by the staff. The latter seem to count on their inability to react and even to recognize themselves in a mirror, thus diminishing their sense of dignity. In the film, Grant's suspect is voiced when he sees nurses in the act of feeding the patients while listening to pop music. He complains that the music is not the choice of the patients', nor respectful of their tastes. Fiona and Grant, conversely, listen to and sometimes dance to the music by Neil Young, a Canadian-born musician and singer, once more, to underline the Canadian setting of this story. Neil Young's words "There is a town in North Ontario" will then close the film.

Yet, Fiona is not so completely lost. She knows things. Grant finds Fiona and her dear friend, Aubrey, at their worst, for Aubrey is about to go back home to his wife, Marian. Fiona asks Grant: "Do you by any chance have any influence around here? [...] I've seen you talking to them...?" (Munro 2001: 303). This is a sign that Fiona, too, sees the members of the staff as hostile and coalesced against patients. Both Grant and Fiona speak of "they/them" alluding to members of the staff almost as enemies.

Fiona's permanence in the clinic is described as a progressive deterioration, particularly after the separation from Aubrey. She does not recognize Grant any longer. She treats him as a newly arrived patient, someone she owes kindness to, as a "persistent" visitor or suitor, but her attention revolves around Aubrey, her new friend. Fiona's and Aubrey's attachment seems to match Grant's past infidelity to his wife, to the point that he imagines a revenge or a charade by his wife, as a sort of late punishment.

Yet, everything is more complex in this text. For Munro shuffles her cards only too frequently. Fiona's new engagement with life is a response to a natural need for socialization. Her presence is so benign as to get Aubrey out of his wheelchair. She becomes his nurse and she supports him while walking. She has found a new agency in the clinic. It is also possible that in her mind she is fantasizing about Aubrey as her once young and shy suitor. Thus, the story seems to echo Joyce's *The Dead*, where Gretta, too, reveals Gabriel of her once young suitor.

On the other hand, Grant's past flirts and love affairs with younger women are attributed to a misinterpretation of waves of feminism uniquely intended as emancipation through sexual transgression on the part of women, which once again, surprisingly, dissolves our too easy notion of Munro as a feminist writer. Gender here is discussed more subtly, through nuances, rather than through easy and clear-cut slogans. Grant is almost excused, he seems pursued rather than pursuer:

Married women had started going back to school. Not with the idea of qualifying for a better job, or for any job, but simply to give themselves something more interesting to think about than their usual housework and hobbies. To enrich their lives. And perhaps it followed naturally that the men who taught them these things became part of the enrichment, that these men seemed to these women more mysterious and desirable than the men they still cooked for and slept with. (Munro 2001: 299)

Aubrey mostly depends on Fiona. What is extremely important in the narrative is that Fiona's presence, her empathy, allows Aubrey to shortly abandon his wheelchair for short strolls. In spite of the fact that he needs support, he is able to slip out of his disability now and then. At the clinic, Grant learns of Fiona's almost miraculous effects on Aubrey, and this is an

extremely interesting passage. Fiona did not want to be a burden to her husband. Moreover, it is normally assumed that elderly people – when they lose their autonomy – end up depending on the younger generations. Here, on the contrary, Fiona is given agency, she acts as a nurse to Aubrey, and this means that elderly people might be reciprocally supportive and might have a social role, till the very end. A similar highlighting of agency is authoritatively provided by Marlene Goldman:

within Canadian literary works people struggling with dementia are neither depicted nor perceived solely as non persons lacking in agency, ontological “black holes”. In “The Bear Came over the Mountain” the narrative’s ambiguous treatment of Fiona’s dementia, specifically her capacity to remember fragments of her past, including Grant’s affairs, makes it impossible for readers to perceive her as a powerless victim lacking in selfhood. (Goldman 2017: 295)

Both the narrative and the film show Aubrey’s disability as permanent and irreducible, thus adding a new theme to old age and caring. His wife hints at his immobility, while Grant witnesses how Fiona has to prevent cards from slipping from his grasp. Yet, the film produces a more romanticised version of Aubrey, who can sublimate his lack of kinetic skills with a talent for drawing, which he expresses in a series of beautiful portraits of Fiona. The film, thus, seems to pick up Munro’s major concern, that is to provide agency to the old. Meaningfully, Aubrey obsessively and serially portrays Fiona’s head and profile: a sign that her head is still fascinating and interesting, still sparking beauty and intelligence, no matter how far it is affected by dementia or Alzheimer’s. Reinforcing this idea of agency with Aubrey’s artistic talent, while insisting on Fiona’s beauty, is another feature that reverses the stereotypical, gothic idea of old women as ugly.

## **OVER THE MOUNTAIN AND BEYOND**

The title of the short story sounds misleading, referring as it does to a children’s lyric, although the critic Héliane Ventura builds an interesting intertextual interpretation of it. The bear and the mountain do not fit in that flat landscape proposed by the film. Yet, they are two unavoidable natural elements in classical Canadian literature. The bear and the mountain

frequently represent the wrestling of man against nature. And in this case Fiona, too, has to fight against nature. The other side of the mountain that the bear has to face and confront with might be the declining or descending side of one's life, as ageing is traditionally thought to be. Yet, the text seems to resist this simple solution by leaving an open ended narrative, full of gaps and unsaid or silenced things (Casado-Gual 2013: 394-395).

Fiona-Grant and Aubrey-Marian represent two elderly couples with different life-styles. Fiona and Grant have neither relatives nor children and represent the typical, self-sufficient, mono-nuclear family of our modernity, now so typical in the capitalist North. Particularly, once left alone, Grant must face everything on his own, he drives a car, he takes care of the house, he cooks his own meals, he shovels the snow. His dependence on Fiona is hinted at when he admits that now his skiing exercise is reduced to just going round and round.

Marian, too, has to rely only on her own strength. She has a son, but he lives on the west coast and seldom comes to visit. He only provides new technological gadgets to his parents (an electric coffee pot and a satellite Tv sports channel to entertain his disabled father), thus substituting affection with money. This technology, including an answering machine, serves to date the short story to the late eighties or early nineties.

The main difference between these two nuclear families is economic, for Fiona and Grant are upper middle class and can afford to pay the fees of a private clinic. Conversely, Marian cannot afford to leave her husband permanently at the clinic, for that would mean selling her house, the only thing she possesses.

The difference between the two families creates an interesting linguistic pun around the word "quit", which becomes more and more relevant in the short story. The first time the verb "quit" is used, it refers to the mark on the floor: "I thought they'd quit doing that" (Munro 2001: 274), Fiona says, meaning that her slippers should have stopped leaving marks like that. And certainly after her quitting the house, they won't be used any more. Towards the end of the narrative, when Grant pays his first visit to Marian in order to try and convince her to bring her husband back to the clinic, for the sake of Fiona, Marian jokes about her habit of smoking. Since Grant says he does not smoke, she asks him if he never did or if he quit smoking. "Quit" (Munro 2001: 311), he answers and remembers that it happened when he started his affair with Jacqui. Thus, the verb "quit" seems to refer

to Fiona rather than to smoking. Indeed, he quit Fiona in the past, and maybe now, too. Vice versa, Marian says she has quit quitting. She has willingly refused to stop smoking or pretending to stop. She has not quit her husband either, whom she takes care of, even though that means her individual sacrifice and renunciation. When she leaves her husband at the clinic it is only for a short vacation.

However, due to her routinely fatigue in taking care of her inert husband, keeping him bed-ridden and under the TV's hypnotic effect does not seem to produce positive effects. On the contrary, Fiona's influence on Aubrey's ability to walk had meant a slight improvement, Marian's attitude clearly shows the fatigue and frustration of care-givers, who inevitably end up exhausting their resources.

It is however most meaningful that Fiona's last words in the story as well as in the film hint at the fact that after all, no matter all the diversions in his life, Grant has not quit her:

"I'm happy to see you," she said, both sweetly and formally. She pinched his earlobes hard.

"You could have just driven away," she said. "Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsaken me. Forsaken."

He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. (Munro 2001: 321)

The short story ends with a happy ending, a moment of recognition and acknowledgement on the part of Fiona. Her gratitude to her husband is moving, yet her condition might be only temporary and one of the last words in the story is "skull", an allusion to death. Ironically, however, Fiona recognises Grant, when he brings Aubrey back to her. As it happened with the Narcissus, here too, Grant is responsible for wrong timing. Perhaps, Fiona is no longer able to recognize Aubrey. She affirms that names elude her. This gift, like the flowers, might be spoilt or wasted.

Grant and Marian represent two different versions of care-givers, both affected in different ways by the grief and difficulty of taking care of disabled people who do not always show recognition or appreciation. Both of them hold fast on their beloved, out of marital duty, love and a life of shared propitious and hostile circumstances. What is striking is their

absolute loneliness and the portrait of an individualistic society, where there is absolutely no sense of community.

Fiona's case is even more striking for her choice is exemplary of a free woman and a self-determining individual. Although the choice to leave her home and her husband might still look improbable and rare, particularly in Southern European countries where religion and tradition might prevent such a gesture. It must be said that a stronger sense of family bonds still characterises the Italian society, where elderly people, disabled people and also mentally disturbed people are taken care of at home, thanks also to new figures, the so-called "badanti". Earlier, in the eighties, they were mostly South American women, more recently they have been substituted by Eastern European house-workers. The Italian National Sanitary System nowadays also offers home assistance for medications and small interventions.

Both Munro's story and Polly's film show a possible path. In the story, Fiona has definitely agency till the very end (Lecker 2015). Grant, too, takes actions be they selfish or generous, and Marian – as Fiona did in the past – implicitly proposes to Grant by inviting him to the dance.

The film goes further, for even Aubrey is allowed agency as a painter, using his brain to coordinate his hand, particularly using his right brain (Bergland 1985: 1), which normally presides over the figurative skills, while Fiona is slowly losing her left brain, presiding over language skills. This inversion reminds us of what happens in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (1809), where two couples exchange partners, and young Otilie feels a pain in her head that is specular to mature and married Eduard's headache:

She [Otilie] frequently suffers from pain in the left side of her head. (Goethe 1872: 28-29)

I have it frequently on the right. If we happen to be afflicted together, and sit opposite one another, – I leaning on my right elbow, and she on her left, and our heads on the opposite sides, resting on our hands, – what a pretty pair of pictures we shall make." (Goethe 1872: 49-50)

In this respect, the film also completes the series of the arts represented. It adds drawing – thus highlighting the visual arts – to reading and writing, which are the main activities of Grant and Fiona, as well as dancing and listening to music. The major implication is that elderly people are not



excluded from the production, performance and consumption of various forms of art.

Moreover, the renewed clinic in both narrative and film might be exemplary of institutions that have been reformed after the abolition of asylums and such like places. A most applauded law was passed in Italy in 1981, abolishing asylums and this brought to the complete reformation of the sanitary system, including clinics for elderly and disabled people. Thus, Fiona's choice is in tune with these new possibilities of being cared for by professionally trained staff, in adequately furnished places, which also meant a relief to families.

The film however, for the sake of romanticising the plot, significantly diverges from the literary text. The short story ends on the recognition of the spouse and does not provide an answer on whether Grant will accept Marian's invitation to the dance.

Meanwhile, the film alludes to Grant's late affair with Marian – for, there is a hint at her moving to live with him – and this is certainly a cause for controversial interpretations. On the one hand, Grant might be blamed for he seems to betray Fiona now, as he did in the past, being incapable of marital faithfulness – “a philanderer”, Munro writes (2001: 284).

In the film, he is portrayed as a new Orpheus, who pays his last visit to his Eurydice, then turns back and finds a substitute and a sublimation not so much in his own art – Grant is not a poet, but he likes reading poetry, being a professor of Nordic mythology and skaldic poems – but in a substitute female figure. This substitution of partners and exchange between the two couples is certainly a matter of questionable ethics if reduced to its literal meaning.

In the traditional elegiac model of Orpheus and Eurydice, for example, the hero seeks his beloved in the underworld, but inevitably relinquishes her and returns to the world of the living, where he is celebrated as a culture-hero. For Zeiger, such narrative frameworks doom women to death and silence. (Goldman 2017: 36)

On the other hand, Grant might be admired for his generosity, leaving space to his wife for a late relief from pain and depression when he offers Aubrey to her, as a gift. In the film, this idea is clearly introduced during one of Grant's visits to the care facility, when he becomes a sort of spectator in a film, where Fiona and Aubrey play the role of aged fiancés

before his eyes. He observes them while sitting on a sofa, as if he were watching a film. This is an interesting shot for it introduces a meta-cinematic element, for we as spectators watch a film where Grant, too, is watching the actors performing their actions. A punk girl, who finds the spectacle of patients and relatives as "fucking depressing" (my transcription), asks Grant why he is sitting there, if his wife is with another man, only to realize immediately how lucky Fiona is to be allowed such space and such freedom.

The film is keener on showing how elderly people might find comfort in living together, having company, uniting their strengths and supporting and helping one another as long as they can. Considering old age as a moment in life when emotions, affections and even sensuality are still possible would certainly be a step forward in our cultural prejudices against the old, the so-called "ageism".

Thus, the Canadian short story and its filmic translation – through the typical ambiguities of artistic masterpieces, the ellipses and gaps implied in and applied by the two media – do provide a model and do provide answers, do suggest cultural challenges. The two works of art suggest a model of social engineering based on communal life and reciprocal support, on providing opportunities, rather than seeing the old merely as disposable, even those affected by dementia and Alzheimer's, as stressed by medical literature (Johnson et al. 2010).

The risks of a growing individualism, of a destiny of loneliness in old age is questioned in both the story and the film, when new forms of social life are suggested, even in the form of private clinics for the elderly, disabled and mentally disturbed people (Jamieson 2014). Alternatively, Grant and Marian keep company to each other in old age. While the story suggests their going out to dance on a Saturday night, the film more explicitly hints at their sleeping together. Their possible life together would be another way to mitigate the absence of extended families whose members might take care of their elders. In a recent survey in Sweden, the answer to the question about what people fear most was "to die alone". Neither the film nor the short story offer easy solutions to face a terrible disease like Alzheimer's, or suggestions for care-givers of disabled people. Yet, these two artworks show old age for what it is, a moment of agency, solidarity, sociability. When Grant expresses his dislike for Meadowlake,

Fiona answers that what one can aspire to at their age, if Alzheimer's has been diagnosed, is just "a little grace" (my transcription).

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