

## **“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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CARMEN CONCILIO, UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

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 homesickness”, in Freudian words, that is, the land/body of the Mother (1919: 15). It is also a young land, geologically speaking, still ‘sparkling’ 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 rendering, rendering 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.