

“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*

Part 2 pages 114-126

AFTER “DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH”: THE NEW INSTITUTION

The clinic where Fiona chooses 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),¹ 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).² 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

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: 2097). 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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