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Unexpected turns in lifelong sentimental journeys: redefining love, memory and old age through Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and its film adaptation, *Away from Her*

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ABSTRACT
Alice Munro's 2001 short story 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and its 2006 film version, *Away from Her*, directed and adapted for the screen by Sarah Polley, are two interconnected narratives through which diverse (and even divergent) representations of romantic love and memory in later life can be analysed. Even if the two texts are constructed on an apparently simple plot line, which basically depicts the last phase of a 44-year-long marriage once the wife, Fiona, presents symptoms of dementia and is interned in a retirement home, they both allow for, at least, two contrasted interpretations. As will be demonstrated, these two possible readings unveil different cultural, social and psychological facets of memory in connection with late-life expressions of love; and each of them contributes, in their own way, to the construction of a dialogical narrative that mediates between the complexities of old age, dementia and gender difference, while at the same time demonstrating the power of literature and the cinema to reflect and refract the complexities of contemporary forms of ageing.

KEY WORDS – narratives of ageing, memory, affective relationships, literature, cinema.

Introduction

> Gonna take a sentimental journey
> Gonna set my mind at ease
> Gonna take a sentimental journey
> To renew old memories.
> ('Sentimental Journey', Bud Green, Les Brown and Ben Homer for Doris Day)

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The so-called revolution of longevity of the population in developed societies has altered our perception of many fundamental aspects of human experience. One of them is memory. Scientific and technological breakthroughs reflect our culture's reverence for memory as much as our deep-rooted fear of memory loss, which becomes a potential threat for our sense of self as we advance into old age. The extension of life expectancy in Western societies has also modified another elemental aspect of human life, namely the length and nature of affective relationships. In particular, long-lasting love relationships can acquire a new value for the individual in old age. The ways in which we experience love and re-shape our relationships in later life not only contribute to a constant re-definition of who we are, but also help us revise our *raison d'être* up to the very last stages of the life cycle.

The relatively recent humanistic turn in ageing studies – epitomised by ground-breaking studies such as Helen Small's *The Long Life* (2007) – has shown that literature and the arts in general can offer truthful, imaginative – and, often, more positive – reflections of the heterogeneous experience of ageing in our contemporary societies beyond the constraints of the empirical sciences (Johnson 2004: 2). The same may be said of the emerging field of memory studies, which also presents a strong humanistic basis.[1] As part of these interdisciplinary frameworks of research, this essay intends to explore the interactions between old age, memory and love in two textualisations of ageing that undermine reductive visions of old age, dementia and gender roles. In particular, Alice Munro's short story 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' (Munro 2001) and its film version, *Away from Her*, directed and adapted for the screen by Sarah Polley (2006) are the two interconnected narratives through which diverse (and even divergent) representations of romantic love in later life will be analysed, together with the different forms of remembrance and oblivion to which they become associated.

The two narratives generated by Alice Munro's story are constructed on an apparently simple plot line, which basically depicts the last phase of a 44-year-long marriage once the wife, Fiona, presents symptoms of dementia and is admitted to a retirement home called Meadowlake. However, as will be shown in this essay, both texts allow for, at least, two contrasted interpretations: on the one hand, what could be called 'a romantic reading' of Grant and Fiona's story, in which the characters' loyalty and affection for each other – especially Grant's for his wife – end up overturning culturally predominant values ascribed to memory and oblivion; and, on the other hand, a more ironic, feminist interpretation that highlights the significance of fostering remembrance in others when one's sense of self has been under threat. As will be demonstrated, these two possible readings unveil different cultural, social and psychological facets of memory in connection with

late-life expressions of love; and each of them contributes, in their own way, to the construction of a dialogical narrative that mediates between the complexities of old age, dementia and gender difference. The multifaceted discourse that is to be derived from the twofold analysis of Munro's story and its cinematic adaptation will ultimately enable a better comprehension of late-life sentimental journeys and some of their possible unexpected turns, especially when those redefine assumed meanings of 'love', 'memory' and 'old age', or challenge the traditional roles of 'husband' and 'wife' in the last phase of a lifelong relationship.

Reinforcing remembrance, subverting oblivion: a romantic reading

'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and *Away from Her* initially present Grant and Fiona's mature love as a serene continuation of their youthful romance.[2] This enables an opening tragic structure in both texts, as the signs of Fiona's dementia threaten the happy memories of the couple's past and, with it, an important part of their identity. This preliminary tragic structure corresponds with the typical 'then–now' contrast that Anne Davis Basting identifies in many narratives about dementia (Basting 2009: 33, 40), in which the past, it could be added, is usually evoked in a positive light in order to contrast with the grim present and the even gloomier future. In both Munro's and Polley's texts, this structure can be considered a narrative requirement, insofar as a happy 'then' needs to be established before the impact of memory loss on the lives of the two protagonists can be truly comprehended. Thus, Munro's story opens with a description of Fiona's family and her parents' house, and then moves on to the moment when she proposed to Grant. In a similar way, the film's second sequence shows this significant moment of Fiona and Grant's life through a flashback that immediately follows Grant's first trip to Meadowlake, the home where Fiona will eventually be interned. Several details in both stories and especially in the film also mirror the warm and serene form of closeness that characterises Grant and Fiona's everyday life, even when the first signs of Fiona's dementia start disrupting it. In particular, the intertextual reference to Michael Ondaatje's love poem, 'The Cinnamon Peeler' (1989), which Grant reads to Fiona in Polley's version, represents one of the tender facets of the protagonists' mature love or, as Munro puts it, the 'liveliest intimacy' such as 'the five or ten minutes of physical sweetness just after they got into bed – something that did not often end in sex but reassured them that sex was not over yet' (2001: 284).

Once the contrast between Fiona and Grant's past and present is established in the two texts, and particularly when the development of

Fiona's illness forces Grant to resort to institutional care, the action of remembering as performed by Grant soon acquires a complementary, more positive value: in other words, it becomes a sign of fidelity. Thus, the traditional association between remembering and being faithful to the beloved during their lifetime and beyond, which is manifested in numerous texts throughout the history of literature, is reinforced in the first part of both the short story and the film. 'Not Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn the living record of your memory', reads one of William Shakespeare's famous sonnets (Booth 2000: 49). At the beginning of both Munro's and Polley's narratives, Grant epitomises this ideal form of fidelity in his personal battle against 'the sword' of old age and especially 'the fire' of dementia. Hence, after the first month of Fiona's internment, during which Grant is not allowed to visit his wife, he restlessly becomes the couple's 're-memberer', the repository of Fiona's fading past, both as Grant's spouse and as an individual. As shown in Polley's film, he complains if the staff in Meadowlake make her wear clothes that do not match her taste; or, by the same token, he takes her books they used to read together, such as Auden's *Letters from Iceland* (1969), which is not only a mnemonic of the kind of intimacy they used to have, but also of Fiona's own Scandinavian roots through her mother's side and, hence, of part of her cultural identity (Munro 2001: 275, 300). As an expert in Norse mythology himself, Grant becomes, in a way, a modest version of the life-instilling Odin: even if at first sight his actions of remembrance seem futile insofar as the forces of (Fiona's) oblivion will eventually defeat him – like 'the great Fenris wolf who swallows up Odin at the end of the world' (Munro 2001: 284) – his first acts of remembrance restore aspects of his wife's former life and prove, at the same time, that the battle against dementia is, despite its inevitable outcome, a battle worth fighting for, especially for the sake of one's beloved.

Alongside the restorative value of positive remembrance, negative aspects of memory also play a relevant role in Munro's representation of late-life love. These have to do with the resurgence of bad memories, in particular with Grant's unfaithfulness to his wife more than a decade before. This troubling episode of Grant and Fiona's marital history, which accounts for his early retirement as a university professor and for the couple's moving to the remoteness of Fiona's family farm (Munro 2001: 287), reappears when Fiona's memory starts to fail – in the film version – and during Grant's one-month separation from Fiona – in the original story. Grant's disquieting reminiscence of his infidelity, conveyed in the form of a dream in the short story and through flashback sequences in the film, forces him to reappraise his marriage to Fiona. Despite the sense of frustration that this remorseful revision entails, it also provokes an emotional re-awakening in him as both husband and lover, as implied by the 'solemn tingling' which wakes him up

early on the morning of the day of his first visit to the home, one month after Fiona's internment (Munro 2001: 287).

Grant's composite acts of remembrance not only lead to restorative actions, but also pave the way for a more profound transformation of the character as Fiona's devoted husband. This transformation becomes necessary after his puzzling discovery of Fiona's intimate relationship with a temporary resident, a man named Aubrey. Following an initial period of confusion and rejection, Grant gradually learns to understand his wife's changing needs beyond the constraining 'then–now' perspective through which he had been looking at her, especially since her internment.[3] Thus, when Aubrey returns to his home and, as a result, Fiona falls into a serious depression that threatens to speed up her deterioration, Grant ends up having an affair with Aubrey's wife in order to ensure that she will take Aubrey back to Meadowlake as a visitor – an action which, in contrast with his past infidelities, is presented as a strategy designed simply to reinstate Fiona's 'new-found' happiness.

To quote Anne Davis Basting once more, 'tragedy may not capture the whole story of dementia' (2009: 45). Indeed, Munro's and Polley's texts first underline the emotional value of positive remembrance in order to explain the distressing consequences that memory loss has for an ageing couple, as well as the healing, and meaning-creating power that good memories can have for those who are close to people with dementia. At the same time, though, the two narratives subvert the traditional association that is commonly established between faithfulness and remembering and which, in other stories about dementia, would lead mainly to a tragic, unfruitful feeling of loss. Hence, in both the short story and the film, Grant learns to 'perform' a kind of social or affective oblivion which helps him re-member his relationship with his wife. In other words, Grant learns to temporarily 'forget' his role as a 'husband' and accept, instead, a new role as his wife's companion or even *confidante* which will suit her new necessities better. Likewise, his surrendering to another extra-marital affair entails the restoration of a troubling past which, ironically enough, helps him resuscitate his conjugal loyalty – a paradox which looks almost like a private 'joke that could never be confided to anybody' (Munro 2001: 320).

A complementary form of 'performed oblivion' is presented from Fiona's perspective when, in both Munro's and Polley's texts, she insists on being taken to a residential home. In the film version in particular, she asks Grant to make love to her and then leave her alone in her new room at Meadowlake. Her grief, made visible in the close-up that shows her lying in bed once she has been left by herself, discloses her previous masquerade of cathartic acceptance. The film's presentation of Fiona's generous and painful letting go of her lifelong relationship with Grant completes the

romantic reading of the two texts, which could also be deemed their predominant interpretation insofar as it can be sustained throughout the two narratives.

It is from this romantic angle that Polley's adaptation of Munro's story has also been read. Amongst the multiple film reviews that *Away from Her* received after its release, Basting draws attention to Sean Axmaker's definition of the film as 'less a drama about Alzheimer's disease[4] than a cinematic poem of love and loss' (2009: 48). This age scholar considers that the strength of Polley's version lies in her focus 'on the *now*', a world 'in which the present and past overwrite each other. . .' and it is still possible to find 'grace in beauty, wonder, kindness and raw human communication' (Basting 2009: 47). Polley herself claims to have been attracted towards Munro's text through its depiction of love in old age: in an interview with Rebecca Murray, she defines the film as 'just an interesting examination of unconditional love' and further categorises it as 'a coming-of-age story about a man in his 70 s. Someone discovering themselves and what they were really capable of and what unconditional love meant at the end of their marriage' (Murray 2012). The inspiration that the young film director found in Munro's characters, and her professed admiration for Julie Christie, Gordon Pinsent and Olympia Dukakis, the actors that play them in her film (Murray 2012), are an example of cross-generational 'formative identifications', as Teresa Brennan puts it, which 'permit different ways of thinking' (Woodward 1995: 91). As Gordon Collier contends, in Munro's fiction 'the ageing and the aged are . . . often benchmarks . . . for people who still have the world fresh around them' (2002: 49). Hence, it can be stated that 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and its film adaptation enable a romantic (re-)interpretation of oblivion and remembrance in later life that overcomes culturally constructed age boundaries.

Faking oblivion, eliciting remembrance: a feminist interpretation

As announced by the popular nursery rhyme to which Munro's title refers, there is 'another side of the mountain' that suggests a different kind of analysis. The lyrics of this popular song read as follows:

> The bear came over the mountain,
> To see what he could see.
> But all that he could see was
> The other side of the mountain,
> Was all that he could see.[5]

As implied by the emphatic use of 'all' in the last line, it is not even clear whether 'the bear' really understands 'all that he could see' at the end of his

journey. It is precisely through this reference to a 'hidden side' of the story and to the bear's lack of vision that we can find the first trace of a feminist reading of the narrative, which encapsulates Fiona's own actions of remembering and forgetting from a completely different perspective.

This interpretation reveals the main contrast between the short story's multi-angled narrative, and the film's less ambiguous narration, since Polley always shows us Fiona's experience through an objective viewpoint and only suggests a more subjective perception through a few flashback sequences and semi-oneiric shots that mirror Grant's thoughts.[6] Munro's short story also renders Grant the apparent subject of her late-life initiation narrative, as suggested by the masculine connotations of 'the bear' in the title; but, significantly, the opening paragraph is devoted to recreating the past image of Fiona, who is depicted as a strong and independent young woman with powerful family roots – including her mother's 'indignant far-left politics' (Munro 2001: 275). This initial portrayal of Fiona's background and youth could be understood as serving Grant's initial 'then–now' perspective, as mentioned earlier; but, at the same time, it also indicates that the signs of Fiona's mental frailty should not be attributed solely to her illness and that, ultimately, the seemingly marginal presence of Fiona's viewpoint in the narrative is just part of a deceptive game of perspectives which, once again, plays with the ever-shifting significance of remembrance and forgetfulness.

Together with the details mentioned earlier, the description of Fiona's capacity to joke about the most serious issues, including her own marriage proposal (Munro 2001: 276), especially tinges the first signs of the character's memory loss with ambivalence. For instance, when Fiona gets lost in town and Grant drives her home, she tells him 'she'd counted on fences always taking you somewhere', and he notices the statement sounds 'as if it were a joke' (Munro 2001: 277). This particular observation can be read in an ironic light if Grant's past affairs are interpreted as the fences that had kept Fiona isolated in their marriage and which, eventually, led them to the physical and social isolation of her family's farm. Subsequent passages of the story – complemented by similar sequences in the film – confirm Fiona's capacity to respond to intimidating or disempowering moments with a witty remark, a 'flippant' response, an 'eccentric whim [-]', or 'a little pretense', as if she was, once more, 'playing a joke' (Munro 2001: 277, 278, 279, 292). From this perspective, the early stages of Fiona's dementia become an opportunity for the character to 'perform' remembrance and oblivion at her own convenience, both at home and in Meadowlake. In this way, she is able to re-construct her own self-esteem by finally responding to Grant's undeclared unfaithfulness, thereby unsettling his empowered, self-defined position as the 'philanderer' in their relationship (Munro 2001: 286).

The tendency of Alice Munro to defy patriarchal structures by challenging, as Adrian Hunter contends, 'male narrational models' and creating 'types of female alterity . . . not by open opposition on male terms, but in ways that patriarchy itself does not conceive of' (Hunter 2007: 176), is mirrored in Fiona's elusive yet delicately perceptible portrayal as a potentially recalcitrant ageing woman who, despite and through her incipient dementia, is granted narrative and fictionalised spaces of rebellion and resistance, not only as a deceived wife, but also as a lover and, by extension, as an individual. If the mastery of Munro's technique subtly imbues the intermittence of Fiona's memory with feminist overtones – which become more significant in the story every time that Fiona treats her husband with 'a distracted, social sort of kindness' as if he were a stranger to her (Munro 2001: 293) – Polley conveys the complexity of Fiona's portrayal throughout the film by means of Julie Christie's self-contained performance, which encompasses the paradoxes of Fiona's 'direct and vague . . . sweet and ironic' personality (Munro 2001: 277) through her control of the gaze and enigmatic smile. Moreover, in addition to Christie's indisputable talent as an actress,[7] the presence of her star persona itself contributes to the network of cinematic signs that undermines a fragile, victimising or passive interpretation of Fiona as an older woman with dementia. As former 'It Girl', as Estella Tincknell (2012: 99) defines her, as representative of counter-cultural ideals in the 'swinging London' of the 1960s, and also as an activist who has rebelled against Hollywood's commodification of her own image, Christie becomes a corporeal repository of disruptive values associated with youth, politics and femininity, thereby encapsulating the binary oppositions by which Fiona comes to be defined or, rather, through which she escapes a standard definition determined by inferiorising markers of age, gender and disability. Christie's graceful preservation of juvenile looks, which the film reinforces by means of stylish costume and a youthful, dishevelled hairstyle, further underline the perpetuation of Fiona's younger, rebellious, sexualised self.[8] With regard to the screen adaptation of Munro's text, Polley's script brings Fiona's feminist agenda to the surface through an invented dialogue in which Fiona surprises her husband by mentioning his past affairs while he is taking her to Meadowlake. In this car sequence, Fiona refers to that unmentioned episode of their past as a sign that she 'is going, but [is] not *gone*'.

Precisely the duplicity of the verb 'to go' in this sentence, which at first sight can be understood as a statement about the borderline phase of her illness, but which can also refer to Fiona's 'liminal presence' in their marriage, indicates the degree of symbolic weight that should be given to the feminist interpretation of the story. Undeniably, different signs in both the literary and cinematic texts suggest that a gendered interpretation of the

story co-exists as a kind of 'Other-ed' 'side of the mountain' in Fiona and Grant's existential, emotional and mnemonic journeys.[9] Nonetheless, the realistic portrayal of the first phases of dementia in the two narratives prevents the reader and spectator from interpreting Fiona's illness as an entirely faked performance of memory loss with a vindictive agenda – even if this possibility is contemplated by Grant for a while, only to be unsettlingly discarded as 'too cruel' (Munro 2001: 292). Rather, it is in the spaces of ambiguity that are created by the first phase of dementia – when, as expressed in the story and the film, memories are 'selective' (Munro 2001: 278) and recognising the loved ones might follow an intermittent pattern (Munro 2001: 292) – that the ambivalent value of Fiona's acts of remembrance and forgetfulness can reside. In this respect, her explicit recovery of past memories in the film, or her disturbingly ambiguous oblivion with respect to her lifelong, assumed role as a wife, can be equally understood as 'performative' in the sense that their enactment has a transformative impact upon her immediate reality. Real or feigned, or both, her actions of forgetting and remembering do transform her relationship with Grant and her presentation of herself as both his wife and as a woman with dementia in unexpected ways. After her first month at Meadowlake, Fiona elicits in Grant the excitement of a new lover – ironically, she becomes 'a new woman' for whom he feels 'an expectation of discovery, almost a spiritual expansion' (Munro 2001: 288), and her sexuality becomes even more appealing insofar as it is suddenly forbidden or banished from him (Munro 2001: 294, 296). Once Fiona's 'new friendship' with Aubrey has been displayed, her 'conjugal oblivion' converts Grant into a persistent solicitor, 'a mulish boy conducting a hopeless courtship' (Munro 2001: 327) or, more interestingly, 'a hopeless lover or a guilty husband in a cartoon' (Munro 2001: 288), a caricature of his former self. Hence, Fiona's acts of remembrance and oblivion place herself at the centre of a new empowering narrative which not only reverses Fiona's and Grant's past roles as faithful and unfaithful spouses, but also plays with the temporal dimension of their relationship by almost reversing it to a new starting point.

The performative value of Fiona's acts of remembering and forgetting, and the specific role that bad memories play in these two acts, not only contribute to a feminist interpretation of the story, but also to a complex representation of the character as an ageing woman with dementia. This representation accommodates opposite notions of consolidation and transformation of the self. Thus, the episode of the film that shows Fiona's remembrance of painful memories establishes a sense of continuity between her past and her present, which counteracts her triply 'Othered' condition from gender-, age- and disability-marked viewpoints and that, consequently, helps her re-establish a sense of individuality that she had been denied in

both private and social spheres. In the short story in particular, the character's overt use of irony reinforces a connection between her younger and older Selves that contests inferiorising attitudes generated by chauvinistic and ageist viewpoints. Referring to Fiona's past and present ironies, as with an episode in which she forgets a fur coat 'unintentionally on purpose', Grant tells the doctor that 'she's always been a bit like this' (Munro 2001: 278), thereby disrupting stereotypes of female senescence like those of the 'angry' or the 'wise' older woman as categories dependent on a woman's (old) age (*see* Brennan 2005). At the same time, Fiona's elusive personality and humorous insight endow her with a quality of resilience with which she can confront her new distressing circumstances, almost as if they were an opportunity for change and self-renewal. As Grant also confesses to the doctor during the first phase of her illness, Fiona seems to be 'concealing a private amusement. As if she'd stumbled on some unexpected adventure. Or begun playing a game that she hoped he would catch on to' (Munro 2001: 278). As has been mentioned, part of this 'game' or this possible 'charade', as Grant puts it later in the story (Munro 2001: 294), is the creation of emotional discontinuities with the past, a practice that can be liberating for the character once the painful memories that deterred her personal growth resurface in implicit or explicit ways, and reshape her present. Paradoxically enough, this liberation can also be related to the character's progress towards old age, and especially to the diagnosis that is to determine the final phase of her life. As demonstrated by clinical researchers such as Harold Blum, 'lessened self-expectations on the part of the older person can benefit the individual' and 'the shaping influence of the ageing process on the way the past and the present are experienced . . . allows for present meanings to be retrospectively transferred to the past' (*see* Kaplan 2012: 21). Indeed, as shown by Munro's and Polley's characterisations of Fiona, the character is capable of disentangling the heavy knots of a silenced past just when she is about to start a completely new relationship with time, memories, her husband and her own, ever-transforming self.

Conclusions

This essay has presented a double interpretation of Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and its cinematic adaptation, *Away from Her*, through a romantic reading as well as a feminist analysis of the two texts. Even if these distinct angles of vision co-exist in the two narratives at different levels – the romantic reading is given more visibility, whereas feminist nuances are more prominent within Munro's literary universe – they both challenge preconceived notions of love, memory and old age. As has been

shown, the romantic reading of the two narratives disrupts the traditional associations that are often established between remembrance and loyalty or oblivion and abandonment, thereby expanding the concept of conjugal love. At the same time, it undermines the 'then–now' contrast of most narratives of dementia through a late-life love story that suggests a new start at the end of its own storyline. The feminist interpretation of the two texts, on the other hand, re-defines the actions of remembering, forgetting and, ultimately, loving, as sources of empowerment and self-renewal for the older woman who is apparently the passive subject of the narrative – whether it is regarded as a love story or as a story of dementia.

Beyond the two possible interpretations through which Munro's and Polley's texts may be read, a series of more general conclusions about the interaction between memory, old age and love can be reached. In the first place, both readings demonstrate the extent to which memory is submitted not only to biological processes, but also to socially conditioning factors, thereby underlining its relational nature and liberating it from the individual's biological destiny. Whilst the biological process that generates memory loss through dementia provokes Grant's and Fiona's separation, it is rather the two characters' remembrance of aspects of their life in common or their oblivion that acquire the greatest significance. Thus, at the end of the story and of the film, Fiona's forgetting the correct form of the verb 'forsake' in the sentence 'You could have just driven away . . . without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken', is not so relevant for the narrative as her recognition of Grant's ultimate act of fidelity, which he underlines by replying 'Not a chance' (Munro 2001: 323). Even if, according to the second reading of the story, Fiona's misspelling of the verbal form could still be read as one of the character's mischievous performances, the linguistic error would equally signify the progression of her illness from a biological point of view. But the memory of who the two characters are, who they were and who they could be for each other, which is implicit in the possibility of Grant's abandoning her, not only resides in the fragility of Fiona's 'sweetly shaped skull', as Munro defines it towards the end of the story (Munro 2001: 323), but also, and for the most part, in the new spaces of intimacy that Fiona and Grant are still capable of creating for and between themselves in the last stage of their lives.

The realisation that, as proved by the two texts and as stated by Basting, 'the biological and social components of memory cannot be separated' (2009: 16), also unveils the psycho-social conditionings of the act of remembering and forgetting themselves, as well as the roles that age and gender play in an individual's re-creation of his or her life narrative. In this case, the two interpretations that have been presented in this essay point at the reassuring role of good memories amidst the destabilising circumstances

posed by dementia. At the same time, they also suggest the opportunity for growth and partial restitution of past mistakes that is offered by the uncomfortable recovery of bad memories towards the end of one's life. Either way, and through any of the two interpretations analysed in this study, Munro's and Polley's texts defy predominant age-narratives of decline which, as Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004: 11) sustains, tinge old age with pessimism and paralyse retrospective judgements. With or without the possible emphasis on a gendered reading, the two narratives counteract the fear of meaninglessness that is ingrained in many stories of dementia (Basting 2009: 4) by offering, instead, the complex portrayal of two characters whose identities are still manifested, contested and re-constructed, albeit from different angles, through their reflective flow between the past and the present – a portrayal that is, at the same time, much more faithful to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the ageing process, as demonstrated amply by contemporary sociological research (*see* Johnson 2004: 48).

In his essay on old age in Alice Munro's short fiction, Gordon Collier affirms that this author 'grants age and ageing no more of a space and place than the world itself would allow in the grand (and petty) scheme of things' (2002: 60). Despite what has just been said, this is partly true of 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and its film version: even if this story is not included in Collier's study, it could be equally argued that ageing is, after all, just one of its main themes, which is interwoven with the topic of dementia and, more in line with Collier's argument, with that of romantic love – expressed and revisited, as has been said, through both traditional and feminist stances, and in different degrees in the short story and the film version. The importance of late-life remembrance and oblivion in Munro's and Polley's narratives also modifies the two authors' presentation of romantic relationships. As Joanne Brown contends, '[c]hanges in gender expectations, sexuality, reproduction and children's rights are said to be ushering in a new discourse of intimacy to which we aspire and by which we increasingly live' (2009: 157). The extension of life expectancy – which has granted more visibility to dementia – and new perceptions of (old) age could well be added to the new circumstances that have prompted, again in Brown's words, 'the notion of confluent love (active, contingent and non-possessive love)', in order to include older people in the new discourse of romance. Indeed, Grant and Fiona's relationship, especially at the end of the narrative, encapsulates 'the pure relationship (based on democratic rights and principles)' that Brown describes inasmuch as the two main characters recover and overcome neglected or hidden aspects of themselves and the beloved through performed acts of remembrance and oblivion, which at the same time enables them to embrace the new manifestations

of their identity – as individuals and as a couple. In a nutshell, and borrowing again from Shakespeare's famous sonnet, both Munro and Polley create narratives where the ageing lover is ready to reformulate her and his mature love through and beyond 'the living record of [the beloved's] memory'.

All in all, the interconnection of memory, old age and love in Munro's and Polley's narratives enables an alternative discourse of ageing where old age and dementia are deprived of their alleged meaninglessness and become, instead, part of a new quest for meaning. This quest is coherent with the travelling metaphor that recurs in many narratives of ageing (Johnson 2004: 84) and which is also embedded in Munro's and Polley's texts through their narrative strategies and symbols. Despite the undeniably distressing circumstances that are exposed by the two stories, they both show how small moments of (mutual and self-) discovery are still possible in desolate scenarios. In a passage of the story that is also represented in the film, Fiona teaches Grant how the flowers springing from the snow-filled swamp hollow 'generate a heat of their own'; the wife tells her husband that 'she had tried it, but she couldn't be sure if what she felt was the heat or *her imagination*' (Munro 2001: 317, my emphasis). Munro's and Polley's fictionalisations of memory, love and old age generate a warmth of their own, too, which bears witness to the power of literature and the arts to offer an authentic mirror of the complexities of ageing in our contemporary world: through their imaginative medium, they reflect and refract marginalised, tabooed or neglected facets of our elongated lives and resulting affective needs, relations and identities, while at the same time presenting complementary ways of evoking or dealing with the past in order to re-interpret – and fully inhabit – the transient infinity of the present.

NOTES

1 *See*, for instance, the important contribution of literary studies to this interdisciplinary field in Erll and Nünning's study (2008).

2 Despite their different degrees of ambivalence, the interconnection between *Away from Her* and its literary source cannot be denied and, in this respect, Polley's film may be considered an almost direct translation or, in Geoffrey Wagner's terms, a 'transposition' of the original (Aragay 2005: 16). For this reason, both Munro's and Polley's narrativisations of Grant and Fiona's story of love in the last phase of their lives will mostly be discussed in parallel. Nonetheless, their distinctive contribution to the discourse of ageing and the fictionalisation of dementia will be enhanced whenever they differ in emphasis or perspective.

3 In both the story and the film, Meadowlake is first presented as the antithesis of Fiona's and Grant's privacy in their family house: even if the centre's facilities have a pleasant atmosphere, its corridors are also depicted – particularly in the

film, through the use of slow motion and over-exposed photography – as the symbols of an inaccessible world that alienates both residents and their families. As reflected in the signs of antipathy conveyed by Grant's mimic expression in the film, or the repetitive and 'othering' use of 'they' in the short story in passages where residents are described (Munro 2001, 282, 289), the two texts also show how interns – and even their ageing relatives, like Grant – are infantilised by the staff. Munro's text reinforces the negative connotations of the centre through the connections that Grant establishes between this space and the way it had looked in the past. In a way, Grant's memories of Meadowlake transform the space into a spatial palimpsest that always reveals, beneath its new agreeable appearance, its alienating foundations. Despite the negative connotations of the centre, a nurse from the home becomes Grant's main helper in his lonely personal journey towards his wife's advancing dementia: not only does she keep him informed about Fiona's adaptation to the home in an extra-official manner, but she also explains to him the different phases of memory loss, thereby anticipating or clarifying moments of pain and confusion that Grant, as Fiona's main carer, will have to undergo.

4 Dementia is never specified as Alzheimer's disease in Munro's story, but it is particularised in this way in the film.

5 In the song, the first and fourth lines are repeated three times, and the third line twice (BBC 2012).

6 An example of this would be the subjective shot in which a voiceover reproduces Grant's reading of a self-help book on Alzheimer's disease while he is shown looking at their house. The book establishes a comparison between what happens to neuronal connections when the brain is affected by this illness and a house that progressively gets dark. While this analogy is revealed to the spectator, Grant sees, or rather, imagines, how the lights in their own house are turned off, one by one.

7 The main films of Julie Christie's career were shot in the 1960s and 1970s, but her main role in the independent film *Afterglow* (1997) restored her popularity. Her interpretation in *Away from Her* gave her numerous awards, as well as her fourth nomination as Best Actress in the Academy Awards. Sarah Polley wrote the script thinking of her for the female leading role (Hopwood 2012).

8 As opposed to the short story, Fiona never gets her hair cut in the film version. In Munro's text, this sudden change in Fiona's image becomes a sign of her gradual transformation into a graceless resident, whose style is in the hands of tasteless institutional carers. The fact that Polley avoids this aspect of Fiona's characterisation in her script reinforces the interconnection between Christie's attractive looks and her former sex-symbol status, and Fiona's subversive characterisation as an ill, older woman. After all, even if in Munro's story the disappearance of Fiona's long hair is interpreted as the loss of 'her angelic halo' (Munro 2001, 299), long hair has typically been a symbol of sexualised, feminine beauty.

9 The different kinds of journey that are shown in Munro's and Polley's texts can be analysed from this triple angle, as with Grant's and Fiona's trip from the family house to Meadowlake, or the images of the couple cross-country skiing together and also by themselves. Even the titles of the two stories evoke the travelling metaphor – as implicit in the action of 'coming over the mountain' in the original narrative, or in the sense of distance conveyed by 'away' in the film title. Mental journeys, on the other hand, are represented through the intermittent movement from the present to the past and *vice versa* in the two texts: in Munro's story, this is expressed by means of ellipsis, flashbacks and narrative

turns, and in the case of Polley's film, through the contrast of texture and cinematographic intensity between the digitally shot sequences of the present and the Super-8-shot, silent sequences of the past.

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