

MEMORY MATTERS: ALICE MUNRO'S NARRATIVE HANDLING OF ALZHEIMER'S IN "THE BEAR CAME OVER THE MOUNTAIN" AND "IN SIGHT OF THE LAKE"¹

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Age can make us more human, if not wiser. This could easily be Alice Munro's motto, to judge by her portrayal of elderly people in her fiction. Illness and old age have always been relevant topics in her short stories, as one would expect of a writer who has never shied away from "the cruel ironies" and the apparent "absurdity of the human condition" (Cox 2013: 277). However, as the writer herself has grown old and experienced physical decline, these issues have gradually moved to the foreground. Although some reviewers (Lorentzen 2013) have noted that Munro's interest in old characters became more visible in *The Progress of Love*, first published in 1986, most critics agree that aging emerged as a central topic with the publication of her *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), a collection including "more and more tales that zero in on old age and infirmity" (Balée 2002: 308). It is to these above-mentioned collections in Munro's extensive list of publications that I want to turn my attention. In particular, I have chosen to revisit one of her most celebrated stories, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain"—first published in *The New Yorker* in 1999, and later anthologized in *Hateship*—side by side with "In Sight of the Lake", included in her last collection to date, *Dear Life* (2012).²

As Susan Balée argues, Munro "manages to create variants of the narrative of decline that no one else has thought of" (2002: 308). While the Canadian writer had explored old age, illness and death in previous narratives, what makes "Bear"

and “Lake” especially poignant is their attempt to fictionalize Alzheimer’s disease. In the following analysis I want to argue that, in scrutinizing the ways in which these characters attempt to cope with an increasingly obvious frailty of memory and dissolution of self, Munro stretches and modulates her narrative art so as to involve the reader in the characters’ process of deterioration. As a result, postmodern uncertainty manages to sneak into an otherwise realist narrative framework. It could be argued that Munro’s use of a disabling illness in these two stories is merely prosthetic, in the sense that it functions as a metaphor for the larger concept of postmodern indeterminacy. Indeed, recent critical appraisals of Munro’s fiction, like Linda Simon’s “Battling the ‘Invincible Predator’: Alzheimer’s Disease as Metaphor” (2014), argue that the current obsession with Alzheimer’s disease primarily reflects the contemporary fear of isolation and fragmentation (14).³ Therefore, she reads Munro’s and other writer’s Alzheimer’s Disease narratives as a subterfuge for talking about those “larger” issues. And yet, I contend that, in Munro’s stories, Alzheimer’s is much more than a narrative prosthetic or a pretext for exploring an abstract concept; on the contrary, her Alzheimer stories are very much rooted in and explicitly explore the very nature of the disease, with its painful loss of memory, its tenuous grasp of reality and the intimation of a dissolving self.⁴ It is more accurate to say that, in Munro’s fiction, disability is used more literally than prosthetically.

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The perception of truth and reality as filtered through time has been one of Munro’s recurrent concerns. The writer is known for her “striking handling of time” (Berthin-Scaillet 2010) and for her fascination with “the effects of time” (Enright 2012), not only *real* time but also narrative time, where she skillfully plays with prolepsis, analepsis and ellipsis in order to reconstruct the way time changes or obliterates memories, and how it gives significance to certain events that had passed unnoticed. Munro has been lauded as a *virtuosa* in the “art of indeterminacy” (Howells 1998: 85), and age seems to highlight that radical indeterminacy, changing your perceptions “of what has happened —not just what can happen but what really has happened” (Munro in Enright 2012). This may be one of the reasons why she usually resorts to dislocations in linear time: “Anachronies disrupt linearity” and complicate the understanding of a given event (Duncan 2011: 156). Sometimes narrative techniques like flashbacks or flash-forwards contribute to building suspense, and then readers’ expectations are more often than not thwarted, as is the case in the title story “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage”. At other times, as we shall see in “Lake”, temporal disorientation is employed to convey the crumbling of the self. These and other structural experiments with narrative time are of paramount importance in Munro’s fiction.

While narrative time, with its back-and-forth movements and its revealing ellipses, becomes a privileged instrument in the —often vain— search for certainties about past events, memory is equally crucial in the reconstruction of the puzzle of the past. More often than not in Munro's stories, its apparent fallibility renders the project of reconstruction arduous if not impossible. Some of her narratives manage to capture the elusiveness of memory precisely by focusing on its frail nature, on its gaps and ruptures. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the narratives dealing with Alzheimer's disease. We tend to find Alzheimer's particularly worrisome inasmuch as it exposes not only our physical frailty, our aching bodies, but also our *aching minds*. This type of dementia⁵ highlights the tenuous grasp that our minds can have of what we understand as reality; as such, it is an invaluable —albeit painful— resource for writers who want to explore the limits of our knowledge and the blurred frontiers of identity.

What Alzheimer conjures up, with “its merciless assault on memory, the locus of selfhood and our connection with others” (Brooks 2011), accounts for the increasing visibility of this disease in literature and films. While the relational aspects of identity cannot be underestimated, it is the conflation of selfhood and memory that seems more prevalent in Western neoliberal societies. In “Struggling over Subjectivity: Debates about the ‘Self’ and Alzheimer’s Disease” (1995), Elizabeth Herskovits focuses on the socio-cultural construction of the illness, especially on the debates revolving around the “loss of self” so commonly associated with the disease. Alzheimer narratives bring to the fore that anguished concern for remaining who we are, and, concomitantly, they force us to reconsider the very constitution of our identity: “what seems to be at stake on a deeper level in the struggle over the self in Alzheimer’s is our very notion of what comprises the “self” and what constitutes subjective experience” (Herskovits 1995: 148). Memory is, presumably, the building block of identity and is thus central to the process of self-formation. This, of course, is a social construct, but few dare to question it. As Herskovits convincingly claims, it is only recently that the Alzheimer’s discourse, with its attendant debasement or erasure of humanity, has come under critical scrutiny, thus forcing psychologists and philosophers to rethink the ways in which human identity is understood (159). For the most part, however, experts and lay commentators alike continue to stress the “horror” of the disease and the helplessness of its “victims”. Among the tragic losses most commonly mourned are the inability to recognize oneself in the past selves (as in photographs) and the loss of accumulated memories that, for many, make us who we are. Elizabeth Ward, for example, describes how the Alzheimer patient has irretrievably lost “that accumulation of concrete experience by which we know life [...] [W]hat seems to be lost to the Alzheimer *victim*, piece by piece, is sense experience, the concrete particulars of the past, until there is only the present, blurred, incomprehensible” (in Herskovits 1995: 157; emphasis added).

Memory, therefore, continues to be central to the Western understanding of human identity, and a dramatic erosion of memory, such as that experienced by Alzheimer's patients, necessarily evokes a parallel erosion of one's identity. In our contemporary societies, then, it is still taken for granted that the loss of memory and the impairment of our "cognitive functioning" (Gaines and Whitehouse 2006: 71) inevitably entails the gradual loss of self. Departing from this pervasive obsession with memory loss, in "The Word is Colander: Language Loss and Narrative Voice in Fictional Canadian Alzheimer's Narratives" (2009), Wendy Roy focuses instead on the "loss of narrative ability" in the patients, and how this is transferred to the diegesis itself. While Roy is aware of the memory loss associated with Alzheimer's, her primary concern is how Canadian fiction explores the patients' inability to narrate themselves and, hence, construct their identity.⁶ Even though I agree with Roy's emphasis on the role of linguistic and narrative skills in the development and preservation of identity, I do not entirely dismiss the role of memory in that process of self-construction. Hence, both will be present in my analysis of "Bear" and "Lake".

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Munro's "The Bear Came Over the Mountain", which gained popularity thanks to the 2006 film adaptation by Sarah Polley, *Away From Her*, traces the gradual losing of touch with reality that an old woman, Fiona, seems to experience.⁷ Although we have an extradiegetic third-person narrator, for most of the story the focalizer is Fiona's husband, Grant, so it is through his eyes that we see the progressive deterioration of Fiona's memory and, we assume, the onset of Alzheimer's. As is usual in Munro's fiction, the chronological linearity in this story is disrupted and the narration moves back and forth, juxtaposing different temporal frames, which are simplified to three in the film adaptation (Berthin-Scaillet 2010). The text opens with a quick analepsis describing when and how Fiona proposed to Grant, and the narrative swiftly goes forward and takes us to the moment when Fiona is getting ready to depart for the nursing home. Then, in another flashback, we are told of Grant's gradual realization that something was the matter with his wife. Here are the first hints that he perceives the deterioration of her memory as "a game that she hoped he would catch on to" (*Hateship*). Grant concedes that, for a while, he found it "hard to figure out" how much Fiona's forgetfulness was due to her absent-minded character and how much to a neurological problem. Fiona seems to view her occasional slips and mistakes in a rather light-hearted way, "as if it was a joke", which would suit her penchant for irony: "I don't think it's anything to worry about. [...] I expect I'm just losing my mind" (*Hateship*). Even when the episodes become more worrying and the police find Fiona wandering in the streets, totally lost, her attitude seems to be one of playful nonchalance:

A policeman picked her up as she was walking down the middle of the road, blocks away. He asked her name and she answered readily. Then he asked her the name of the Prime Minister.

"If you don't know that, young man, you really shouldn't be in such a responsible job". (*Hateship*)

In fact, Fiona's grasp of reality seems to be still fairly firm when she decides to move to an assisted living center, Meadowlake.⁸ When the time comes to go to the nursing home, Fiona appears to take it all in her stride. Before leaving her house, she flippantly compares life at the nursing home to living "in a hotel". As Grant drives Fiona to her new *home*, she recognizes the countryside around Meadowlake, where both had gone "night-skiing" many years before. Once more, Grant muses about the degree to which her memory is damaged, since she remembers past events in such a detailed manner. Fiona finally *checks in* and Grant goes back to their house, alone.

Neither visits nor phone calls are allowed during the first month to facilitate the patients' adaptation to the new routine, and Grant cannot stop thinking of Fiona: "some ticking metronome in his mind was fixed on Meadowlake" (*Hateship*). When he is finally allowed to visit her, Grant gets up early, "full of a solemn tingling, as in the old days on the morning of his first planned meeting with a new woman", both anxious and thrilled, driven by "an expectation of discovery, almost a spiritual expansion" (*Hateship*). At the same time, his unusual buying of an expensive bouquet tinges his arrival with implicit guilt: "He had never presented flowers to Fiona before. Or to anyone else. He entered the building feeling like a hopeless lover or a guilty husband in a cartoon" (*Hateship*). To Grant's dismay, Fiona not only fails to recognize him, but she also seems to be much more attentive to Aubrey, her "new friend" or, in the nurse's words, her "best buddy". Apparently, Fiona takes Grant for a new resident, and her last words have a highly ironic resonance:

"I better go back", Fiona said, a blush spotting her newly fattened face. "He [Aubrey] thinks he can't play without me sitting there. It's silly, I hardly know the game anymore. I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. [...] So I'll leave you then, you can entertain yourself? It must all seem strange to you, but you'll be surprised how soon you get used to it. You'll get to know who everybody is. Except that some of them are pretty well off in the clouds, you know—you can't expect them all to get to know who *you* are". (*Hateship*, emphasis in the original)

Given Fiona's playful character, Grant even expects her to turn around and explain that it was all a joke. Just as the onset of her illness had been confusing and, at first, he had not been able to figure out whether everything was due to her quirky character rather than to a serious malady, so the new situation was also disorienting: "He could not decide. She could have been playing a joke. It would not be unlike

her. [...] I wonder whether she isn't putting on some kind of a charade" (*Hateship*).⁹ Although this sentence appears in both versions of the story, it is the longer one (*Hateship*) that especially underscores the fact that it may all be a farce, a prankish game on the part of Fiona. This makes sense to Grant because he has not always been the ideal husband. During his time away from Fiona, Grant reminisces about their life together and we learn that their marriage has been punctuated by his frequent affairs with university students, infidelities that he had apparently managed to keep secret from Fiona. If this were not the case, and she had known about his cheating all along, this "charade" might be understood as retribution: Fiona would be paying Grant back for his betrayal. This will become even more significant at the end of the story, where the information provided by these flashbacks will complicate the interpretation of the last scene. As Munro often does in her fiction, analepsis allows her to "postpone or withhold vital pieces of information that may confirm suspicions fuelled earlier" (Duncan 2011: 156). However, this situation lasts longer than a practical joke is expected to. Fiona's "best buddy", Aubrey, seems a more solid presence in her new world than her own husband, whom she does not seem to recognize at all. He acts rather possessive, especially in Grant's presence. Fiona's aforementioned "blush" and her timid touching of Aubrey's hand at the end of the scene reveal the irony of the new situation: both Aubrey and Fiona seem to feel and behave like teenagers in love —suggested by the teenager analogy appearing in the longer version of the story— while Grant is only an insignificant, tolerated presence.

The visits continue, but Grant sees little change in Fiona's attitude to him or Aubrey. If anything, the two residents' attachment seems to grow stronger by the day, while Grant continues to be perceived as an intruder who disrupts the lovers' intimacy. Grant acts as a jealous husband, more explicitly in the longer version of the story, where he wonders about the nature of Fiona and Aubrey's mutual involvement. Not wanting to use the term *sexual*, he merely asks the nurse whether it is common for these attachments to develop further and "go too far" (*Hateship*). The nurse's answer does not put Grant's mind at ease, especially her passing comment that it is as common for old women to go "after the old man" as the other way around (*Hateship*). Part of the reason why Grant's suspicions are not allayed by the nurse's words is the way in which language betrays her. Here, Munro resorts to what Héliane Ventura describes as "misnomers, grammatical mistakes and other happy 'infelicities' which point towards another locus of meaning, secretly but intentionally encoded in between apparently ordinary language" (Ventura 2010a). The specific example that Ventura sees in "Bear" is the incorrect past participle that the nurse employs when he answers Grant's jealous query: "Old women going after the old men. Could be they're not so wore out, I guess" (*Hateship*). By replacing the correct verb form *worn* with *wore*, whose near-

homophone lurks in this sexually charged context, the nurse (un)wittingly fuels Grant's suspicions about Fiona's busy sexual life at the nursing home. Although Ventura polemically interprets the short story as "document[ing] the transformation of a lady into a promiscuous Alzheimer patient", she is right in that the linguistic mistake "allows truths that belong to the unconscious or cannot be directly expressed to come to the surface and destabilize our understanding of characters" (2010a). In this case, the ugly truth very likely exists in Grant's imagination only, rather than in the actual facts of the affair, but its effects on him are no less true for that. Even though the nurse quickly adds that "Fiona is a lady" (*Hateship*), in contrast to her previous allusion to promiscuous old women, her attempt to reassure Grant fails, and he cannot help imagining his wife "in one of her long eyelet-trimmed blue-ribboned nightgowns, teasingly lifting the covers of an old man's bed" (*Hateship*).

Everything changes when Aubrey has to leave Meadowlake: his wife has come back from her trip and wants to take him back to their house. Fiona falls into despair, refuses to rise from her bed, and her health deteriorates rapidly after Aubrey's departure. The home supervisor warns Grant that, since his wife is "not thriving", they might have to start "consider[ing] upstairs" (*Hateship*), where they place the residents who can no longer take care of themselves. Facing that grim prospect, he decides to pay a visit to Aubrey's wife, Marian, and convince her to take Aubrey back to Meadowlake for regular visits, if not permanently, for Fiona's sake. This is the price he is willing to pay to avoid putting Fiona's tenuous life at risk. At first, Marian does not agree to Grant's plan, not so much out of jealousy, as Grant had expected, as for materialistic reasons.¹⁰ However, only a few hours later, Marian leaves a message on Grant's voicemail inviting him to a dance, because "it doesn't hurt to get out once in a while" (*Hateship*). Grant sits near the phone, weighing the pros and cons, and assessing Marian in an obviously sexual way, but we are never told what his final choice is. This constitutes a good example of Munro's astute use of narrative ellipsis, for the narrative gap that precedes the last scene allows—and even compels—the reader to envisage multiple interpretations. And yet, most critics and reviewers assume that Grant finally goes on a date with Marian and that, some time later, he manages to bring Aubrey along when he visits Fiona. This common reading of the narrative ellipsis may also be caused by the film's unambiguous adaptation of Munro's original story, in which the director "renders this improbable trade-off [of spouses] explicit by allowing the spectators more than a glimpse into Grant and Marian's bedroom", while in both versions of the short story "we are not allowed to witness such *rapprochement*", since the writer consciously "leaves unuttered the terms of Aubrey's return" (Ventura 2010b).¹¹

True enough, the last paragraph in the penultimate scene, focalized through Grant as has been the norm throughout the story, reads as a not too subtle sexual appraisal of his next *prey* and places him back in his role as philanderer: Marian's "cleavage, [...] would be deep, crepey-skinned, odorous and hot. He had that to think of, as he dialled the number that he had already written down. That and the practical sensuality of her cat's tongue. Her gemstone eyes" (*Hateship*). Despite the narrative ellipsis, this anticipation of sexual pleasure hints at the fact that Grant starts a relationship with Marian or, as Robert McGill perceptively notes, at least "play[s] on Marian's attraction in order to gain her permission with regard to Aubrey's visit" (2008). In addition, Grant's excessive attention to Marian's charms, already obvious in the description of his visit to her house, somehow diminishes or tarnishes his otherwise apparent altruism: "Munro tinges Grant's generosity with a whiff of egoism, as when he privately enters into a not-entirely-indifferent appraisal of Marian's physical attributes" (McGill 2008); read in this context, "his claim to be pursuing 'fine, generous schemes'" proves ironic (McGill 2008), "parodic" (Ventura 2010b), hypocritical. However, in both versions of the short story, the intervening scene is not present, so we can only conjecture as to whether Marian and Grant get involved in some sort of sexual or romantic relationship. If they only flirt and merely agree to Aubrey's visits, Grant's sacrifice can be construed as less cynical than otherwise.

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The final scene is even more crucial than the ambivalent narrative ellipsis. Rather short and sparingly narrated, the scene explicitly confirms the presence of Fiona and Grant, who engage in a brief dialogue, but Aubrey's presence in the same room is never ascertained. The description remains ambiguous. The first thing we notice is that Fiona seems to be doing better than the last time Grant visited her: she is no longer bed-ridden and she seems to have taken up reading again, in this case a book that Grant had given her as a present. She does not remember this fact, but she does remember that she would never have chosen for herself the color she is dressed in: "I think they've got the clothes mixed up—I never wear yellow" (*Hateship*). This might be construed as a sign that she is recovering her memory, at least the more distant one, which is common not only among patients with Alzheimer's condition, but also among old people in general, as Munro notes in an interview: "It's interesting what happens as you get older because memory does become more vivid, particularly distant memory" (Munro in Awano 2013: 184). Although this detail might have sparked Grant's reflections and fed his hopes of Fiona's recovery, the narrative voice is not explicit about this. Instead, what follows is a concise dialogue supplemented with few, but deeply relevant narrative comments:

"Fiona...", he said.

"You've been gone a long time. Are we all checked out now?"

"Fiona, I've brought a surprise for you. Do you remember Aubrey?"

She stared at *him* for a moment, as if waves of wind had come beating into her face.

Into her face, into her head, pulling everything to rags. (*Hateship*, emphasis added)

This last paragraph effectively describes the loss of memory in metaphorical terms. In Fiona's startled gaze, as that of someone who has been physically and emotionally *bouleversé*, Grant reads the mental deterioration that he has already witnessed. The shorter version of the story is even more emphatic: "pulling everything to rags. All rags and loose threads" (*NY*). Here, the telegraphic repetition reinforces the metaphorical force of "rags" and "threads", which become an apt objective correlate for the disorder that Grant imagines exists in Fiona's mind. Significantly, too, in this early part of the episode, there is no explicit deictic reference to Aubrey. He may not have entered the room yet, or if he has, Fiona has not yet seen him, as her eyes seem to be fixed on Grant the whole time. Whereas the *New Yorker* story originally stated "She stared at Grant for a moment [...]" (*NY*), in the longer version Munro skillfully opts for a vague "She stared at *him* [...]" (*Hateship*). Thanks to her dexterous choice of words Munro manages to reproduce in the reader the same disorientation that Fiona must be feeling under the ravages of Alzheimer's disease. For a moment, we do not know whether the "him" she is looking at is Aubrey or Grant. After all, "Munro is interested in how we get things wrong" (Enright 2012), and that applies not only to people with dementia, but to apparently *sane* people like Grant or the reader.¹² Through her narrative architecture and her linguistic choices, Munro encourages the reader to entertain doubt, to waver between different interpretations, to experience the confusion that Fiona feels at that moment, and that Grant, to a lesser extent, has experienced as well. The apparently simple linguistic choice of an unanchored pronoun —*him*— makes all the difference in terms of narrative control and rhetorical effectiveness.

The final part of the scene remains equally ambiguous, and the *him* vaguely identified:

"Names elude me", she said harshly.

Then the look passed away as she retrieved, with an effort, some bantering grace. She set the book down carefully and stood up and lifted her arms to put them around *him*. Her skin or her breath gave off a faint new smell, *a smell that seemed to him* like that of the stems of cut flowers left too long in their water.

"I'm happy to see you", she said, and pulled his earlobes.

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

He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. He said, Not a chance. (*Hateship*, emphasis added)

Here, the reader may be more inclined to see Grant as the person being hugged, from the very fact that only the character-focalizer would have been able to notice the “faint new smell” in Fiona, and Grant has been the focalizer for the entire story. Such productive ambivalence, unfortunately, vanishes in the film version, where visual realism replaces textual ambiguity, and the device whereby readers can share Fiona’s uncertainty about reality is lost. This sudden epiphanic moment, couched in the classical *topos* of anagnorisis, differs from the kind of subdued ending that Munro tends to prefer, but proves very effective in making us participate in the characters’ profound sense of disorientation.

This last scene also succeeds in highlighting the linguistic deterioration associated with Alzheimer.¹³ First, Fiona recognizes that “names elude me” (*Hateship*), which is as much a sign of memory loss as a metalinguistic statement. More importantly, Fiona’s last words, her hesitation when using the past participle of *forsake* reproduces linguistic deterioration and at the same time dramatizes the torture of being at a loss for words: “[...] forsook me. Forsooaken me. Forsaken” (*Hateship*). It is not just communication with the others that is at stake, it is the ability to narrate/construct the self that is also at risk. Ventura interprets these words differently, as “a process of reparation of language and reparation of the self” (Ventura 2010b). I would argue that the “reparation” Ventura sees in this last part of the scene is, at most, temporary, since Fiona’s decline is undeniable, and time can contribute only to deterioration, not to amelioration.

The ending leaves us with many unanswered questions, not about Fiona’s progress and the ultimate outcome, which we know is death, but about the provisional situation that emerges from Fiona’s apparent recognition of her husband. We do not know whether she will take up with Aubrey again, or if that option is ruled out now. The same can be said of the relationship between Marian and Grant, whatever its nature. And yet, these are all circumstantial and secondary issues. What matters here is this final anagnorisis, both painfully ironic and gratifyingly empathic. On the one hand, this final recognition conjures up Grant’s previous suspicions of a playful revenge.¹⁴ We can indeed construe Fiona’s involvement with Aubrey as part of her cruel scheme to make Grant pay for his infidelities. Even then, as Coral Ann Howells claims, the doubt remains as to whether Fiona has actually succeeded in her endeavor or whether Grant will relapse into deception: “the strange sly ending elides divisions between present and past as the woman with her old ‘bantering grace’ suddenly makes a joke to her husband. But is this real warmth or only imagined? And does his reassuring response just repeat his old marital betrayals? [...] As so often with Munro there is no way of knowing” (2003; cf. Balée 2002: 309; Simon 2014: 11-12).

On the other hand, the final anagnorisis can be interpreted in more celebratory terms, thus giving some respite in an otherwise unsparing narrative of human pain and estrangement.¹⁵ I, for one, am more inclined to read the ending at face-value, as a genuine recognition, devoid of any vengeful connotations. The irony remains that it is only when Grant gives up his selfish possessiveness and Fiona is free to pursue her relationship with Aubrey that she finally recognizes Grant. Or it may not be ironic, but a certain poetic justice rewarding Grant's selfless act. Either way, Munro's ultimate triumph lies in her uncanny narrative gifts: not only her ability to make readers empathize with a hateful character, Grant, but, more crucially, her ability to proffer a privileged glimpse into a crumbling mind, Fiona's. For a brief moment readers are not sure who that person is that Fiona is hugging: we no longer know what is real, names elude us too, and the very demarcations between sanity and insanity prove flimsy, a process that becomes more obvious in the next story, "In Sight of the Lake".

In this short story, one of the last to be published by Munro, the writer once more explores that tenuous boundary that separates reality from illusion, what might have happened from what really happened. Here, Munro resorts to space metaphors to render more vivid the progression and the effects of Alzheimer's disease. Seemingly narrated in a realist mode, with her typical attention to detail (Beran 1998: 227), "Lake" traces the real/imaginary journey of a woman in search of an "Elderly Specialist" (218), in the euphemistic jargon employed by the doctor's assistant. The beginning of the story replicates the grammatical conventions of joke-telling by referring to the main character with the indefinite *a* and using the historic present tense: "A woman goes to her doctor to have a prescription renewed..." (217). This register both prepares and does not prepare the reader for what is coming. On the one hand, the whole story may be seen as a prank played on the reader, a joke after all. On the other, the subject in hand is serious and dramatic enough: the apparent onset of Alzheimer's. The story is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator but clearly focalized through the woman, Nancy. The narrative voice starts by hinting at the early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, since Nancy has apparently "mixed up Monday with Tuesday", which makes her wonder whether "her mind is slipping a bit" (217). She then decides to go to the village where the new doctor's office is located, to get familiar with the place, even if her appointment is for the following day. She drives to the town on her own, without her husband, thus trying to verify her self-sufficiency.

The small town becomes the first evident objective correlate in the short story. Like Nancy herself, this small town "has seen better days" and its clock "no longer tells the time" (219). Perceptive readers will realize that her wandering about that rather empty town analogically signifies her wandering in her own *emptying* mind.

Since, in this case, the focalizer is not external to the patient, as was the case in “Bear”, but is the patient herself, the reader may start entertaining doubts as to the accuracy of the narration. If Grant found it hard to tell the difference between absent-minded mistakes and the first symptoms of Alzheimer’s in Fiona’s behavior, Nancy is even more confused as to her own mental decline: “It takes her a while to figure that out.... The doctor’s name [... has] slipped below the surface of her mind” (220). The reader’s unease gradually increases, but confidence is newly restored when, after a while, that name “come[s] back to her” (220). This memory slip is reasonably accounted for: it can happen to anyone, it does not necessarily indicate brain deterioration. The name slips her mind once more some time later, when she stops to ask for directions, which can trigger off readerly doubts once more.

In her search for what could be the doctor’s house, Nancy finally strikes up a conversation with a man who is tending his garden. At first, he answers her curtly as if she were an unwelcome nuisance, an intruder, much like the plant he snips at for “encroaching on the path” (224). He soon relents and starts talking about the town, even though he himself is “not from around [t]here” (225). The way townspeople hush as the two of them walk by is rather ominous and may disturb the reader, who at this point has no inkling of what is going through their heads. One wonders if those people surmise that Nancy is somehow disturbed and the man is accompanying her so that she does not get lost again. This would be confirmed by the last image Nancy sees as she drives away:

When she is on her way out of the town she catches sight of him again in the rearview mirror. He is bending over, speaking to the couple of boys or young men who were sitting on the pavement. [...] He had ignored them in such a way that she is surprised to see him talking to them now.

Maybe a remark to be made, some joke about her vagueness or silliness. Or just her age. (228)

She soon arrives at the nursing home that the man had mentioned as being just out of town.¹⁶ It is apparently deserted, which Nancy is not surprised at, since it is evening already, and “[b]edtime comes early in these establishments” (229). The building, like the parking lot, seems “spacious” and easy to access, for “the door opens on its own” (229). Once inside, she finds “an even greater expression of space, of loftiness, a blue tinge to the glass. The floor is all silvery tiles, the sort that children love to slide on [...]. Of course it cannot be as slippery as it looks” (229). Once more, spatial metaphors prepare us for the epiphany that closes the story. The description of the building, with its emphasis on empty space and slipperiness, cannot but evoke in the reader the very image of a failing mind. The fact that Nancy starts speaking “to somebody in her head” (229) does not help to dismiss

this impression either. There is nobody to be seen, not even at what looks like the receptionist's desk, so Nancy starts showing signs of irritated surprise: "You would think there would be a way of getting hold of somebody, no matter what the hour. Somebody on call in a place like this" (230).

As the spatial references become more and more immaterial or disembodied, the metamorphosis of real into imaginary space becomes more conspicuous: "She gives up on the desk for the moment, and takes a closer look at the space she has found herself in. It's a hexagon, with doors at intervals" (230). What follows is a Kafkaesque description where doors take you nowhere and see-through windows do not allow you to see through (230-231). Frustrated by "the trick of the glass" or "the uselessness of the polished knobs", Nancy feels more and more desperate: "There is nothing to do but get out of this place" (231), which, of course, she is unable to do. A perceptive reader might have guessed, by now, that the building Nancy is entering is Cicero's "memory palace". The allegorical resonances of the spatial description have become rather obvious: Nancy is both lost and trapped within her own empty, uninhabited brain, and what fails to be "on call" is her own consciousness, her own sense of identity. At one point in "Bear" the narrator referred to the residents of the nursing home as "inmates", but it is in "Lake" that the prison-like atmosphere becomes more literal. Nancy finally resigns herself to living in this restrictive "inside" looking at the "flowers outside", in the "mild evening light" (231). The metaphor of light complements the spatial allegory, as Nancy becomes aware of the gradual closedown of her brain: "The place will get dark. Already in spite of the lingering light outside, it seems to be getting dark. No one will come". (231-232). Loss of language seems simultaneous with that slow dimming of the mind's "lights", as she is unable to utter a word, "to yell" for help (232).

At one point the pain becomes physical, as Nancy finds it hard to breathe: "It is as if she has a blotter in her throat. Suffocation" (232). The language employed accordingly becomes more telegraphic, and the staccato rhythm imitates her being out of breath as much as her trying to regain self-control: "Calm. Calm. Breathe. Breathe" (232). To the loss of language and breathing difficulties, the narrator now adds a third factor: the loss of a sense of real time. Nancy cannot tell if "the panic has taken a long time or a short time" (232). In narrative terms, readers cannot be sure if this has taken a few minutes, months or years, for the next thing we see, in the final scene, is a woman who has lost her sense of time. Or so it seems to others:

There is a woman here whose name is Sandy. It says so on the brooch she wears, and Nancy knows her anyway.

"What are we going to do with you?" says Sandy. "All we want is to get you into your nightie. And you go and carry on like a chicken that's scared of being et for dinner".

“You must have had a dream”, she says. “What did you dream about now?”
“Nothing”, says Nancy. “It was back when my husband was alive and when I was still driving the car”.
“You have a nice car?”
“Volvo”.
“See? You’re sharp as a tack”. (232)

While the pages of “Lake” up to this point have narrated a *lie* in the multiple forms of illusion, dream or mirage, this last concise dialogue, much like the one closing “Bear”, wakes us up to reality: Nancy is already a patient in the nursing home. An image had anticipated this narrative reversal, that of the bicycle rider that Nancy caught sight of while wandering in the unknown town: “Something about its rider is odd, and she cannot figure it out at first” (222). Then it dawns on her: “He is riding backward. That’s what it is. A jacket flung in such a way that you could not see—or she cannot see— what is wrong” (222). Like Nancy, readers may suspect something is off-balance in this story, but fail to see what. The “jacket” hiding the narrative deceit from the reader is the apparent realist convention within which the narration seems to be working.¹⁷ It is only when the claustrophobic metaphors start to accumulate that we get a glimpse of the narrative ruse, which is finally revealed in this last scene.

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This last, *real* dialogue also contains clues that confirm Nancy’s fears of dissolution. Once more, Freudian slips are instrumental in conveying messages that cannot be openly articulated. In Sandy’s patronizing simile, Nancy is “scared of being *et*” (232, emphasis added), a slip or else a variant instead of the correct grammatical form, “eaten”; in fact, Nancy is indeed afraid of being reduced to non-human materiality, to an *it* without a clear consciousness of herself. This process of “objectification” functions as the “disease double”, both haunting Alzheimer’s patients and threatening the non-patients who, in “contemplat[ing] the self-as-monster in Alzheimer’s” have to confront their “own future potential monstrousness” (Herskovits 1995: 152, 160). Furthermore, the fact that Nancy can still function in the referential present—she can read Sandy’s name on the brooch and is able to recognize it as the nurse’s name—proves equally disturbing for readers. If she is able to understand these things, if she is able to remember the car she used to drive, she may also be aware of her mental deterioration; hence, her “dream” may not be a dream but a faithful description of her agony.

Once more, just as she had done in “Bear”, Munro gives us a taste of what it must feel like to be partially aware of the crumbling of memory and identity caused by Alzheimer’s. In “Lake”, Munro dares to use the patient as the main focalizer, which confounds and leads the reader to see reality as Nancy does, with no certainty, even though, in the last page, she ironically feels “she is nearly safe” (232). As happened in “Bear”, the last scene in “Lake” invalidates the smug

certainties of the preceding pages (cf. Cox 2013: 277). Following in the steps of Calderón's *La vida es sueño*, Munro "stage-directs the confusion between life and illusion", as Ventura puts it, dissolving "the boundaries between sanity and dementia" and undermining the sanctity of "[t]he ultimate threshold, that of life versus death" (2010b).

Time, especially temporal disjunction, proves essential in eroding such certainties and underscoring the fragility of the self. In an analysis of several stories included in *Too Much Happiness*, Cox argues that "sudden transitions in the lives of their protagonists [imperial] the continuity between past and present", with the consequence that "[t]he sense of an enduring, essential self [seems to be] under threat, especially when her characters reach old age" (2013: 279). This is what happens in these stories that pivot around characters suffering Alzheimer's disease: their sense of self becomes shaky, as their memory and language abilities begin to crumble, and old certainties about human identity, sanity and insanity, start to fall apart.¹⁸

True literature, Viktor Shklovsky argued, must achieve *ostranenie* or defamiliarization (1965: 12-13). Critics agree that this is Munro's most significant talent as a writer: "To enter and engage with an Alice Munro story is to see what you think you know with fresh eyes" (Haun 2010). In the two stories analyzed in this essay, it is through an unexpected convergence of narrative technique and thematic focus that Munro accomplishes such a feat. Not only does she narrate, skillfully as ever, the gradual decline associated with Alzheimer's, but she also manages to involve readers in that process of gradual disorientation, by playing with our expectations, pointing to the undecidable nature of language and of narrative itself, and debunking all the certainties we had treasured so far. Munro's fiction, "sharp as a tack", pierces our smug complacency until we are compelled to participate in that radical indeterminacy, in that bottomless fragility that is deeply human.

Notes

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². Henceforth, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and "In Sight of the Lake" will be referred to as "Bear" and "Lake", respectively.

³. Following Susan Sontag's contention that "a culture needs to translate an illness into metaphors to explain something more than disease", Simon argues that the recent proliferation of narratives focusing on AD or Alzheimer's Disease bespeaks our "abiding fear of loss, isolation, and disorientation" (Simon 2014: 14). Thus, Simon reads Munro's and other writers' use of AD as

narrative “prosthesis”, even if she does not use the term herself. For an in-depth study of narrative prosthesis, see Mitchell and Snyder.

⁴. As we shall see later, this dissolution of the human self may be more in the observer’s gaze than in the person who has Alzheimer’s, as Tom Kitwood and Kathleen Bredin have argued; for them, the person with some form of senile dementia may even become the “epitome of how to be human” (in Herskovits 1995: 157).

⁵. There is no scientific agreement as to whether Alzheimer’s disease significantly differs from other forms of senile dementia; the difference may be quantitative rather than qualitative, as some experts have noted (Herskovits 1995: 149). For a detailed history of the “discovery” and “construction” of Alzheimer’s, see Fox 1989 and Herskovits 1995.

⁶. Accordingly, Roy dismisses fiction like Nicholas Sparks’ *The Notebook* and Munro’s “Bear” for their “concentration on loss of memory” and their neglect of language problems.

⁷. There are two versions of this story: the shorter one that first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1999 and the longer version included in the 2001 collection, as mentioned above. In order not to confuse readers, after each quotation I will briefly note *NY* for the original *New Yorker* version and *Hateship* for the longer version.

⁸. Elderly people often react to changes in their environment with disorientation and even shock. This is even truer if they have to move to a “home” to be cared for. For an in-depth study of the relationship between memory and domestic environment among elderly people, see Krasner 2005.

⁹. Grant asks the nurse, but she cannot be of much help to him: “She might not [know who you are]. Not today. Then tomorrow—you never know, do you? Things change back and forth all the time and there’s nothing you can do about it” (*Hateship*). Such radical indeterminacy underscores the feeling of helplessness not only for Grant, but for the reader as well.

¹⁰. She does not want to send Aubrey back to the expensive nursing home for good, a likely consequence of his frequent visits, which would only upset him. If Aubrey were sent to Meadowlake on a permanent basis, Marian would have to sell the house she struggled so much for: “And it means a lot to me, my house does” (*Hateship*).

¹¹. Polley’s decision to offer one possible interpretation, in detriment of others, makes Berthin-Scaillet wonder whether one can “cinematize a text” while keeping “the guessed-at ambiguities it withholds” (2010). For a detailed analysis of Polley’s adaptation of Munro’s short story, see McGill’s (2008) and Berthin-Scaillet’s (2010) critical articles, as well as Alleva’s (2007) review.

¹². Grant’s confusion is metaphorically suggested by his spatial disorientation at the Meadowlake home: “The more he explored this place the more corridors and seating spaces and ramps he discovered, and in his wanderings he was still apt to get lost” (*NY* and *Hateship*). It is even more explicitly explored in the longer version of the story, which adds the following: “He didn’t like to mention this to [the nurse], lest she think he was suffering some mental dislocations of his own” (*Hateship*). His own forgetfulness as regards the term “drape” highlights the fact that anyone is liable not only to forget a word, but also to suffer memory or mental disorders.

¹³. For an exploration of language loss in recent Alzheimer’s narratives, see Roy (2009).

¹⁴. This revenge may be alluded to in the title, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”. For a detailed analysis of this phrase, inspired in a children’s “nonsense” rhyme, and its impact on how we interpret the story, see Ventura (2010b). The critic sees Fiona as the bear in the song/title, who “engages in a journey which takes her to a different world called Meadowlake”. However, either Grant or the reader can also be read as the bear who gets to see “the other side” of the mountain: how it feels to be cheated, in Grant’s case, or how it feels to lose one’s mind/memory, in the reader’s.

¹⁵. Most critics agree that Munro always shies away from sentimental and

moralist attitudes. Her style has been described as "nonjudgemental" (Beran 1998: 227) and "unsparing" (Duffy 1998: 182). Compare her muted, unsentimental style with Polley's adaptation in *Away From Her*, especially the parting scene, with its "excess of pathos" in the adaptation: "the film stages à l'excès what the text keeps silent" (Berthin-Scaillet 2010).

¹⁶. If the nursing home in "Bear" was named after a lake, this one is similarly called "Lakeview Rest Home". This coincidence can be caused by a real(istic) geographic landmark in a region well known for its myriad lakes. At the same time, the allegorical function of the lake is as old as Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, where it witnessed, mirrored and participated in the physical and psychological collapse described in the narrative. House and selves were literally "swallowed" by Poe's "deep and dank tarn". The lake not only bespeaks decay but obliterates identity by drowning it in its liquid homogeneity, much like Alzheimer's disease. In conclusion, apart from evoking

appeasing images of serene old age, lakes have traditionally conjured up ominous threats of drowning and dissolution.

¹⁷. In addition, the street where Nancy sees the cyclist "is a curved dead end. No going farther" (222). Like her brain cells, like her degenerative illness.

¹⁸. Significantly enough, in these late stories, unlike what had happened in her earlier fiction, where Munro often focused on the caregivers, she turns her attention more and more to the patients themselves. It may be argued that Grant and Fiona share protagonism in "Bear", but in "Lake" it is clearly Nancy's plight that is foregrounded. Privileging the person who is experiencing the symptoms of the disease proves exceptional among Alzheimer narratives. As Philip Stafford puts it when reviewing the discourse surrounding the disease, "it is as if no one has thought to ask these people about the nature and experience of their illness" (in Herskovits 1995: 153). In this, too, Munro shows her unusual talent.

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