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Remembering Forgetting

Abstract

What is entailed in literary, artistic and filmic mappings of dementia? How do writers and artists negotiate their journeys beyond the limits of an identity ‘identified’ by the ability to remember, uncovering elliptic, metamorphic varieties of existence, multiple temporalities, disjointed perceptions of space? Narrating dementia opens representation to different syntaxes and structures, transcribing absence, but also complex and often self-reflexive forms of presence and of care. In their endeavour to salvage dementia’s forgotten lives, authors confront their own memories and sense of identity and those of their community, present, past and future, exploring histories – individual and collective – that have often been repressed. What dynamics of looking, listening and relating are implied in work by creative artists and writers, but also, differently, in autobiographical writing by people with Alzheimer’s in the early stages of the disease? What new languages – verbal and visual – and understanding of language are evoked by remembering forgetting?

1. Countries of disease and of the mind

The «country of my disease» is the metaphor that dominates *Hard to Forget: An Alzheimer’s Story*, a book by Charles Pierce, an American sports journalist. The author’s father, grandmother, uncles and aunt all died of Alzheimer’s; thus for him, as Lucy Burke comments, the disease is «not simply some exterior nightmare but part of an interior landscape, a constitutive feature of his sense of home, self and belonging»[1]. In recounting how he came to explore Alzheimer territory, he relives the story of his life. His journey takes him into family history inter-

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[1] Lucy Burke, *“The Country of My Disease”: Genes and Genealogy in Alzheimer’s life-writing*, in “Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies”, 2, 1, 2008, p. 72.

twined with medical knowledge and stories of other people, including the researchers and specialists who temporarily inhabit their patients' country. By recounting their individual personalities, ambitions and rivalry, applying the biographical approach used to reconstruct the lives of his father and other relatives, Pierce brings 'personhood' into the field of medical discourse.

How do writers and filmmakers negotiate their journeys into the territories of dementia, countries of disease and of the mind, states of being that lie beyond the limits of an identity conventionally "identified" by the ability to remember? «Who are we without memory? Is a "self" possible when the ability to construct narrative through memory is broken?», asks Anne Davis Basting[2].

The identities engendered by dementia are fractured, elliptic, yet also metamorphically plural. Within its country/ies, multiple temporalities overlap, form warps of time and frozen moments as fragments of the past invade and replace or complicate the present. Space is mobile and disjointed. Texts open to unfamiliar dimensions of existence: absence, but also complex forms of presence. Syntaxes, rhetorics and structures are transformed. In salvaging dementia's forgotten lives, authors confront their own memories and the rememberings and forgettings of their societies, their sense of identity and of life or death to come, interrogating the modes and tools of their expression[3].

2. Self-life-writing

While Pierce's book is a future perfect, potential autobiography or autopathography, the country of the disease is also mapped by people

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[2] Anne Davis Basting, *Looking back from loss: views of the self in Alzheimer's disease*, in "Journal of Aging Studies, 17, 2003, p. 88.

[3] See, for example, Nicola Gardini, *Lo sconosciuto*, Sironi, Milano, 2007, p. 94: "Nicola", the intradiegetic narrator, begins to question the relationship between thought and words after reflecting on his father's fractured speech and defining him a poet.

who already have Alzheimer's and decide to confront their condition in writing. Since autobiographical writing usually implies the ability to remember and lack of memory the loss of identity, this is almost a contradiction in terms. But for most authors their commitment has a political dimension. By writing about the disease, they affirm their identity as subjects, able to reflect on, remember and tell their story, coherently, imposing order on the disorderly contents of their minds and lives. Their narratives view dementia from within: an alternative to the depersonalizing, distancing vision from without and from above associated with medical discourse and the clinical gaze. Going against the representations of people with dementia as empty shells, non people, zomby-like examples of the living dead, writers with Alzheimer's assert their individuality and independence as complex, sentient beings: people rather than patients. «If I am no longer a woman, why do I still feel I'm one?» asks Diana Friel McGowin. «If no longer sensual, why do I still enjoy the soft texture of satin and silk, against my skin? My every molecule seems to scream out that I do, indeed, exist, and that that existence must be valued by someone!»[4]. Encouraged to keep a diary as therapy, her writing soon became a form of militancy, turning her not only into an example of «An Alzheimer's Who Talks», but «An Alzheimer's Who Talks Back!»[5].

For people like McGowin, describing their condition allows them to keep control, as long as possible, over what they are losing, and break their isolation. By connecting their present state with their previous life and stories, they affirm and try to consolidate their sense of time and their positioning within a wider social and cultural context.

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[4] Diana Friel McGowin, *Living in the Labyrinth*, Delacorte Press, New York, 1993, p. 114. McGowin's symptoms date back to at least ten years before her book was published (see Annette Leibing, *Divided Gazes: Alzheimer's Disease, the Person within, and Death in Life*, in Annette Leibing and Lawrence Cohen, *Thinking About Dementia: Culture, Loss, and the Anthropology of Senility*, Rutgers UP, New Brunswick, 2006, p. 253).

[5] Diana McGowin, *Living in the Labyrinth* cit., p. 121.

Engagement with other people features also in the revision and editing of the writers' final texts. The very act of writing and remembering may require the collaboration of others, although this seldom takes the form of explicit co-authorship. Robert Davis describes his own experience:

> Last September as I began to outline thoughts for this book, I was able to write them out. Although many words were missing, and many sentences unclear, Betty, my wife […], was able to decipher my intent and type it into the computer. Then together we read and discussed until I felt sure my feelings were recorded. Chapters 1, 8, 9 and 10 were written this way. By January, I could no longer type a complete thought or keep my head together to write out very much, so I rented a dictaphone and wrenched Chapters 3, 4, and 5 this way. Chapter 7 became so disjointed that we had to take the paragraphs of my description of the physical aspects and let Betty rewrite them. Chapter 6 and the Epilogue are Betty's alone. […]. Also we have laughed at the many paranoid paragraphs that she has removed as we felt there was no need to so vividly illustrate some of the symptoms I describe later[6].

Basting interrogates some of the implications of this practice. By arranging their narrative chronologically, creating «a reflective 'I' who looks back on the course of the disease from a place where cohesive sentences are […] impossible»[7], and using «language cleansed of the disease – spelling, grammar, and memory of dialogue and events […] pristinely intact»[8], authors like McGowin and Davis place themselves outside their condition. Although their struggle «to gather up the fragments of self into a recognizable whole as part of the[ir] battle against the disease»[9] contradicts the lived experience they set out to convey, signs of the disease surface even in the most carefully laun-

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[6] Robert Davis, *My Journey into Alzheimer's Disease: Helpful Insights for Families and Friends; a True Story*, Tyndale House, Wheaton, IL, 1989, p. 18. Cit. in Anne Davis Basting, *Looking Back* cit., p. 92.

[7] Anne Davis Basting, *Looking Back* cit., p. 98.

[8] *Ivi,* p. 89.

[9] *Ivi,* p. 98.

dered texts. Partial views and partial selves emerge in most of the writing and are displayed in some of the book covers and titles[10]. In a note on McGowin's dust-jacket, presenting a strip of small prints of a photograph of the author smiling, sharply defined in the centre, fading away on either side, Leibing draws attention to its representation of what she describes as an «entire face», as against the half face on the cover of Thomas DeBaggio's first book, «implying that he is only in part a full human being»[11]. Yet the gradual fading of McGowin's image reveals an underlying fear of disappearance, of erasure of the self: «there are many days when I am painfully aware that less of me exists than the day before», McGowin admits, but «for now, I can say, I am still here! Diane McGowin exists!»[12].

Living in the present of their writing as they strive to recuperate their fading past and face their fading future, the authors borrow the «myth of the fully independent 'I'», Basting observes, in order «to give strength and courage to [others] facing the disease»[13], but also to themselves. In dementia writing, «[c]oauthored chapters and assistance with grammar, spelling, editing and transcribing point not to the weaknesses of the authors' selfhood, but to the strength of their social identity»[14], as, too, does the inclusion of informative paratextual material by relatives and specialists.

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[10] See Cary Smith Henderson, *Partial View: an Alzheimer's Journal*, Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas, TX., 1998.

[11] Annette Leibing, *Divided Gazes* cit., pp. 263 (n. 19) and 253. The reference is to Thomas DeBaggio, *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer's*, The Free Press, New York, 2003.

[12] Diane McGowin*,* cit. p. 116. See also Thomas DeBaggio, *Losing My Mind* cit.,. p. 157: "*Do you not understand I am not dying, just disappearing before your eyes?*".

[13] Anne Davis Basting cit. p. 98.

[14] *Ivi*, p. 97.

3. Reflexive selfscapes

A writer Basting does not engage with is Thomas DeBaggio, a onetime journalist and later a successful herb-grower who was diagnosed in 1999 with early-onset AD at the age of 57. His books, *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer's* and *When It Gets Dark: An Enlightened Reflection on Life with Alzheimer's*, present a deeply problematic, reflexive approach to the relation between memory, writing and the self: «For me now, any question of identity becomes profound and difficult. Without memory you lose the idea of who you are»[15]. The act of writing accentuates but also reorients and supplements the loss, repositioning and doubling the author's self: «When I am writing, I am someone else looking at me and the world»[16]. By bringing his inner self onto the public, relational space of text, writing enables him to interrogate and contextualize both the self and world he looks at and the self who does the looking.

Needing a form suited to his content, DeBaggio decides to reflect the working of the disease in the structure of his book, turning what was originally a diary into an even looser, but carefully worked out form. Its «multilayered style» is intended to illustrate «memory's main faults and strengths, [...] the parameters of long- and short-term memory and how Alzheimer's works to destroy the present and the past»[17]. To achieve this, he sets up three intersecting narrative lines: a reconstruction of his early life and family; representations of his «mind-clogged, uncertain present»; extracts from official documentation on Alzheimer's research – all three «mixed together, as [...] in the brain»[18]. Various forms of spacing interrupt the text, while italics signal the eruption of fragments of feeling and reflection of particular intensi-

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[15] Thomas DeBaggio, *Losing My Mind* cit., p. 42.

[16] *Ivi,* p. 97.

[17] *Ivi,* p. xi.

[18] *Ibid.*

ty, creating a fourth, unstructured level within the text, suggesting the plural, complicated nature of the author's mental and emotional life.

The territory of DeBaggio's disease is self-reflexively writerly. The objects and visions that appear and disappear in his shifting landscapes include the words, letters, syllables and phrases he needs to express his world in writing. Formerly a tidy man, he finds himself «surrounded by clutter»[19]. And his disorderly room provides a mirror-image of his brain: «a jumble» not of objects, but «of words awaiting order with nowhere to go»[20]. When he started writing as a teenager for a local newspaper, he felt excitedly as if he were floating above the earth. Now, «writing is like walking through a dark room. Sometimes I have to get down on my knees and crawl to find a path through the silent jungle where words are not easily picked and meaning is untrustworthy»[21]. When «*[t]he words are under control, […] the letters that form the words squirm in their own directions*»[22]. The act of writing releases the memory of language: «*the flood of sentences begins only when my pen unleashes a flood of writing memory*»[23], but the liquid element can be destructive. Similar sounding words create a «leaking alphabet of reality»[24]. Later, the liquid mobility of words – and of DeBaggio's world – make reading difficult: «My world today has all the strangeness of the flowing images of an underwater world. Sometimes I try to read a sentence but several of the words appear unfamiliar»[25].

Disoriented and disorienting though it is, his world grows even more disturbing as the disease takes him into the final, suffocating realm of silence: «The struggle to find the words […] has become in-

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[19] *Ivi,* p. 14.
[20] *Ivi,* p. 15.
[21] *Ivi,* p. 17.
[22] *Ivi,* p. 20.
[23] *Ivi,* p. 199.
[24] *Ivi,* p. 181.
[25] Thomas DeBaggio, *When It Gets Dark: An Enlightened Reflection on Life with Alzheimer's*, Free Press, New York, 2003, p. 7.

surmountable. I must now be done with writing [...]. I will soon be stripped of language and memory [...]. I am on the cusp of a new world, a place I will be unable to describe. It is the last hidden place, and marked with a headstone»[26].

For a time, writing continued to bring meaning to his life. A year later, his second book on Alzheimer's appeared. Towards the end of the book, we find him at his computer, describing the «losing battle» he is fighting: «Words tell us who we are and where we've been. [...] To lose word-making skills is to compromise a large part of what makes us who we are»[27]. Yet his book is an extraordinary testimonial to the success of the endeavour. No longer intercepted by extracts from medical documents, but by hauntingly beautiful reflections on the life of the birds, plants, fish and insects that inhabit his garden and on his relationship to soil and water, *When It Gets Dark* continues the to and fro motion of the earlier volume. Scenes from past and present alternate as before, but the author lingers on them longer in his search for continuity and connection to counter the growing sense of loss.

Although this is Debaggio's last book, it is not his last testimonial. National Public Radio had begun a series of interviews in December 1999, shortly after the author's diagnosis, following his desire not only to «document his decline» but to «break through what he called the shame and silence of Alzheimer's»[28]. Even in the last years of his life, when he could no longer write, interviews continued to make public the progression of the disease, registering the rapid deterioration, now, of his ability to speak. The last took place in June 2010, eight months before his death. Although his utterances are no longer comprehensible, he still tries to make them. We hear not only the words of his wife

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[26] Thomas DeBaggio, *Losing My Mind* cit., p. 207.

[27] Thomas DeBaggio, *When It Gets Dark*, cit., pp. 204-5.

[28] Melissa Block, *A Decade of Alzheimer's Devastating Impact*, NPR Media Player, 26 June 2010, <http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=127857149&m=127887747>

and son and of the interviewer, none of whom can understand him, but the sound of DeBaggio's voice as he strives to intervene.

4. Addressing others

Moving from autobiographical writing by people with dementia to literary and filmic representations from the outside widens the range, bringing history more extensively and creatively into the countries of the disease. The perspective is seldom located within the minds or speech of the demented characters, and where it is, through imaginative reproductions of thoughts and memories, this is explicitly mediated by the imagination of other characters or narrators. An exception is Tony Harrison's film-poem, *Black Daisies for the Bride*[29], in which people with Alzheimer's are filmed and their utterances incorporated into Harrison's poem.

Sometimes, reconstructions of the past are narrated to the person with dementia, as in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Sur ma mère*[30], or Donatella Di Pietrantonio's *Mia madre è un fiume*[31], or are made with this intent. In works by Lisa Appignanesi and Elie Wiesel, journeys – real journeys – are undertaken into the countries of the un- or pre-diseased past of the diseased person and of the society in which s/he lived[32]. The journeys serve to gather together the memories of relatives, friends and neighbours, information and documentation from official sources, visual memories preserved in the architectural and natural landscapes in which the person lived. The intention is to perform what Wiesel's initially sceptical narrator finally promises he will attempt, a «transfusion

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[29] Tony Harrison, *Black Daisies for the Bride* (1993), in *Collected Film Poetry*, Faber and Faber, London, 2007. The film is directed by Peter Symes.

[30] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Sur ma mère*, Gallimard, Paris, 2008.

[31] Donatella Di Pietrantonio, *Mia madre è un fiume*, Elliot edizioni, Roma, 2011.

[32] Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: A Family Memoir*, Vintage, London, 2000; Elie Wiesel, *L'oublié*, Seuil, Paris, 1989.

de mémoire»[33]. Tragically, the progression of the disease makes the project impossible, since in the time it takes to gather the information, the person with Alzheimer's becomes unable to receive it.

In Michael Ignatieff's *Scar Tissue*[34], the narrator's exploration takes him not only into his mother's past, but into the disease itself and the discourses that govern its perception. The narrator describes his mother's brain scans as he looks at them; he discusses the disease during heated arguments with his brother, a medical researcher, and also in an exchange with a neurologist. The neurologist interprets the mother's behaviour in the light of the information provided by her scan. Although the narrator doesn't question her diagnosis, he tries to integrate the specialist's knowledge with his own, seeking to explain what the neurologist insists are symptoms as the expression of his mother's personality and habitual way of acting.

In nearly all the works, the journey is also into the self of the narrator. Dementia becomes a form of narrative prosthesis, since it is the presence of the demented person that enables the construction of the story. This has ethical implications, which may be why the mode adopted is seldom explicitly that of biography or autobiography, even when the author, as well as his or her narrator, is reacting to and working through the difficulty and sorrow of living with – and losing – a person suffering from Alzheimer's. A distance must be taken, as for example by foregrounding the creative, inventive nature of the narratives. Tahar Ben Jelloun defines his reconstruction of his mother's life in *Sur ma mère* as a novel. After her illness had taken her back into her past, she confided in him for days on end. Her rambling outflows allow him to discover her life in the old medina of Fes in the Thirties and Forties, to imagine her moments of joy and guess at her frustrations. But in or-

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[33] Elie Wiesel, *L'oublié* cit., pp. 203 and 329. Wiesel's novel is also a reflection on the devastating impact of forgetting on his protagonist, since his very identity as a Jew is founded on memory and the sense of time. See in particular pp. 9-12 and 94.
[34] Michael Ignatieff, *Scar Tissue*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1993.

der to write about them, he had to invent her emotions and translate her silences. His book, he says, is a true novel, for it is the story of a life of which he knew almost nothing[35]. In an interview, he adds that his mother's illness paradoxically facilitated the work of the novelist: «l'Alzheimer, qui est une maladie horrible, paradoxalement a ouvert des portes à le romancier que je suis»[36]. Her natural reserve, typical of Islamic women, gave way before the disinhibiting effect of the disease, thereby enabling her son to work – as a novelist – on what he learnt, interweaving past and present to reconstruct her life. Even while he was with her, suffering as a son, he was also Ben Jelloun the novelist (recalling how DeBaggio's doubling of his self-enabled him both to write and to confront his own illness through writing).

The book Ignatieff devotes to his mother's illness is also a novel, but of a different kind[37]. Although the details of the story are closely based on his family's, presenting them as fiction allows him to make radical changes. Above all, to rethink and vicariously relive his experience and rather questionable behaviour. In real life, the part attributed to the first-person-singular narrator of the story was played not by Ignatieff himself but by his caring, ever-present brother: «to the degree that *Scar Tissue* was based on personal experience, th[at] experience wasn't mine. It was my brother's. He was there. I was the absent brother»[38].

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[35] See the author's statement on the back of his book.

[36] *Rencontre avec Tahar ben Jelloun*, initially recorded in the *Entretiens du site Gallimard* series. Part of the interview is now available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUddhRo9Ha4>.

[37] Printed after his mother's death, *Scar Tissue* was preceded, several years earlier, by a short story, *Deficits*, in "Granta", 1989, in which he already mixed biography and fiction. Published in the early stages of his mother's dementia, its alteration of fact and its revelation of her condition received indignant criticism. The story was incorporated into the novel.

[38] Sabine Durrant, *Serial Thinker* in "The Guardian", 24 February 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/feb/24/kosovo.politics>.

5. *Other pasts and presents*

Writing about Alzheimer's encourages memory-work on the part of the authors and their narrators. « [A]t the level of the cultural imaginary,» writes Lucy Burke, «a character with Alzheimer's often becomes a means of focusing upon the histories of the displaced, the migrant and the exiled». Witnessing how memory is destroyed by the disease leads writers to reflect on the vulnerability not only of the person with dementia, but of «histories and heritages that exist outside [...] official historiography»[39].

Appignanesi's *Losing the Dead* is an example of this kind of memory-work. It was explicitly inspired by the endeavour to retrieve the past her mother was forgetting, to «anchor [her]self against the rudderless ship of her mind» and find the «kind of order» that «writing always entails»[40]. Unlike Ben Jelloun and Ignatieff's books, Appignanesi's is presented not as a novel but as *A Family Memoir* (its subtitle). But the author makes clear, from the start, that «the voyage into the past is always coloured by invention»[41]. Her journey into her parents' past, in Poland and Canada, resembles, she says, «an archaeological excavation»: «The objects sought for, alluded to in story, even documented in the formality of 'survivor interviews' or archives, may or may not be there, or they may be so written over by tales and memory and the passage of history, that one can only guess from the traces at their original use and shape»[42].

In order to assemble her mother's scraps of memory in «some kind of sequence», Appignanesi needs to set them «side by side with the fuller versions» she remembered from childhood and with the memo-

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[39] Lucy Burke, *The Country of My Disease* cit., p. 68.
[40] Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead* cit., p. 7.
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ivi,* p. 8.

ries of other people[43]. Trying to find a context for the woman's fragmented recollections, floating in a sort of limbo, she turns to history books, since history «makes sense of memory», providing «a grid for individual experience»[44]. But then she realizes that the confusion brought today by Alzheimer's echoes the confusion that ruled her parents' lives, caught in the «frenzied rush of days and nights» in World War II. It is here that she decides to leave books aside and travel to Poland to «visit the sites of memory»[45]. Not only of her family, but of Jewish Poles in general, included or excluded from the constantly shifting memory of the nation according to the political needs of the moment. Thus her family memoir develops into a reflection on the politics and languages of memory in general. In the «complex tangle of remembering and forgetting» revealed by conflicting representations of the War and the Holocaust, she seeks the «living tissue of memory» embodied in individual lives and stories as against what she calls the «dusty and barbarous history of facts and statistics»[46], or the «mute stone» of monuments and buildings she tries – usually in vain – to «will into speech»[47].

Despite her effort, she finds herself «in […] a Borgesian labyrinth with an accumulation of disappearing objects – one house now a library, another a car park»[48]. Again, an uncanny reflection of the disappearings produced by Alzheimer's in her mother's mind. When she finally returns home, letters from Poland inform her that her own birth was never registered and, soon after, that now no traces of any members of her family are to be found in the Registry of Residents in her birth-place: «this time no one in my family seems to exist. The slate is

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[43] *Ivi,* p. 82.
[44] *Ivi,* p. 83.
[45] *Ibid.*.
[46] *Ivi,* pp. 5-6.
[47] *Ivi,* p. 171.
[48] *Ivi,* p. 201.

clean. Official history refuses to coincide with family memory. Everything is open to invention»[49].

6. Erasures

Appignanesi's images of erasure, evoking creation as well as loss, recalls similar images in other works and offers a different slant on the fading or partial faces on the covers of books by people with dementia.

In Ignatieff's *Scar Tissue*, the narrator's little boy is

> learning to write his name on his eraser board. He erases the first letters of his name with his left hand, while writing the last [ones…] with his right […]. It seems to fascinate him, as if he is experimenting with his own disappearance. It is also as if he is miming what it is like to be with his grandmother. No matter what he says, a hand keeps erasing his words from the board of her mind.[50]

Other eraser boards appear in Tony Harrison's 1993 film-poem, *Black Daisies for the Bride*, set in the dementia section of a Yorkshire nursing home, where Harrison observed and interviewed the patients in order to develop his poem and the film he made with Peter Symes.

The patients participate in the film directly as themselves and their sounds and fragmentary, at times surrealistic speech are transcribed in the poem. Professional actors play double roles: nurses, but also brides in old wedding photographs the film brings to life[51]. Embodying the past lives of some of the women, they sing their stories to them before disappearing down the corridors of the home as they disappear from the women's memory. The patients' names are written on an erasable

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[49] *Ivi,* p. 231.

[50] Michael Ignatieff, *Scar Tissue* cit., pp. 44-5.

[51] For a brilliant discussion of the "bridal trope that runs through Harrison's text" and, generally, of the ethics of dementia representation, see Lucy Burke, *The Poetry of Dementia: Art, Ethics and Alzheimer's Disease in Tony Harrison's "Black Daisies for the Bride"*, in "Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies", 1, 1, 2007, p. 70.

board and the rhythm of the cleaner's cloth moving to and fro as she wipes some of them out repeats that of windscreen-wipers erasing snow from the therapist's car. The snow too brings erasure, covering and obliterating the world outside the home with a «blizzard of forgetfulness»[52]. Yet it is also a snowfall that remembers. It continues to fall throughout the film, but what we and the patients see are not snowflakes but confetti, shreds of wedding memories resurfacing from happier times.

In an earlier poem, *The Mother of the Muses*, «obliterating» falls of snow isolate the Canadian Home for the Aged in which Harrison's father-in-law was living, an «outer world of blur [that] reflects the inner»[53]. Here however the poet is addressing not only the oblivion of his father-in-law and the other elderly inhabitants (mostly immigrants), but a memory loss of his own, together with other cases of remembering and forgetting and of restorations and denials of memory: the reconstruction of Dresden or the willed forgetting in revisionist doctorings of the Nazi past, both of which are themselves remembered in a television programme broadcast in the Home.

Willed forgetting is also at the centre of Lee Chang-dong's *Poetry*[54], which opens with the gradual appearance of a young girl's corpse, floating down the river. Later, we learn that drowning was her way of escaping, through suicide, the continual rapes she was subjected to by a group of boys. The families' attempt to suppress the knowledge and memory of the boys' responsibility provides one of the film's narrative lines. The other – working as a sort of counterpoint – concerns Mija, the grandmother of one the boys, diagnosed with Alzheimer's after revealing her increasing difficulty in remembering words. Fascinated by poetry, Mija goes to poetry classes to learn how to write a poem. In or-

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[52] Tony Harrison, *Black Daisies for the Bride* cit., pp. 183, 200, 216, 217.

[53] Tony Harrison, *The Mother of the Muses*, in *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1992, p. 39.

[54] Lee Chang-dong, *Poetry*, South Korea, 2010.

der to do so, the teacher tells his class, showing them an apple, we must first learn how to see, how to comprehend and savour all the qualities and beauty of the material objects we observe.

By the end of the film, it is evident that the will to forget has failed. In the final sequence, while the teacher is reading Mija's poem – "Song of Agnes" – to the class, the scene changes, but her words continue. While Mija is not physically present, we see the girl, Agnes, as she was, alive, on the bridge overlooking the river before she drowns. Then even her image disappears and the camera focuses on the water, fading into darkness, as the words continue to be read, until the poem – and the film – come to an end.

Both water, running through many other representations of dementia, and erasure feature also in the video in which the American photographer, Vanessa Woods, explores her grandmother's diagnosis[55]. Images appear and disappear, including fragmentary words and signs scribbled on a sort of magic notepad (like little Jack's eraser board). In notes published on her website, Woods describes her film as «sustained by two melodies – text and imagery – that repeat themselves, unfolding in alternate rhythms to emulate the mental obfuscation and confusion of Alzheimer's». The presence of water suggests a «'river of time,' or fleeting memories and the ultimate drowning of those memories», a visual articulation of the grandmother's «descent into literal figurative darkness». Woods created her film by animating photographs of a variety of images and objects: «photographic stills taken in my grandmother's apartment in Corsica, in combination with old family photographs, her physical objects (pearls and gloves), my diary text, and various other collected imagery (brain diagrams, etc.)». In the second part, the rhythm speeds up frenetically to give «a sense of the rap-

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[55] Vanessa Wood, *On Alzheimer's*, 2006. The description of the contents of the DVD that follow, together with considerations on her filmwork in general, were taken from the artist's website, <http://vanessawoods.com>, consulted 25.7.2009.

id state of deterioration, and the subject's consequent frustration, anger and reeling sense of loss in coping with Alzheimer's Disease».

On Alzheimer's inaugurates a series of experimental videos in which «[t]he flux between the still and moving image allows narratives to continually develop and shift and provides a means for examining conceptual relationships between photography, time, image and memory». Once again, reflecting on dementia brings the artist to reconsider the tools and form of her expression. Woods's awareness of «the limitations of verbal language» recalls DeBaggio's sense of the need for a new language and lexicon: «Alzheimer's […] is a world so secret its vocabulary has not been written»[56].

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[56] Thomas DeBaggio, *When It Gets Dark* cit., p. 27.

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