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Living oblivion: Poetic narratives of dementia and fatherhood in Pia Tafdrup's *Tarkovsky's Horses*

Katharina Fürholzer

1. Poetic narratives of dementia and loss

In 2006, Danish poet Pia Tafdrup wrote a eulogy in honour of her father who had just died of dementia. Her intimate text laid the ground for the cycle of poems *Tarkovsky's Horses* (Tafdrup 2010; originally published Tafdrup 2006),¹ which can be understood as a poetic portrayal of the 'existential metamorphosis' (Seng 2017, my translation) dementia may cause. Tracing a father's final stages of dementia, his death, and its aftermath, the book's fifty poems – framed by an additional intro and outro poem – depict the continuous changes this disease had forced on the family: from being a father to a sick and eventually a dead person, and from being a daughter to a relative and eventually a surviving dependant. *Tarkovsky's Horses* confronts the reader with experiences of human existence that go beyond the familiar. When Tafdrup states that the book's 'poems narrate the drama it is to be human' (Semmel 2010, 44), this abrogation of genre borders seems like an analogy to the borders we may be forced to cross when being confronted with dementia. Accordingly, Tafdrup's book allows the poems to be read both as individual texts and as joint parts of an overarching metanarrative about the disease of dementia, the biography of the father, and the autobiographical experiences of a daughter who has slipped her father's mind.

¹ For the book's background see Semmel 2010, 44–7.

The specific presentation of these narratives is inseparably shaped by the book's specific genre: poetry hints to what is in and beyond a word, opening up unknown perspectives on the hidden dimensions of language as a central medium with which we try to fathom the world and the phenomena within it. By being able to sensitize us for the plurality of a word's possible de- and connotations, poetry is hence a means to approach and ponder also health-related issues from a different angle.² American poet Patricia Traxler's reaction to her father's Alzheimer's diagnosis demonstrates this quite impressively; 'Aphasia is an oddly beautiful word, like the name of a flower. I imagine it blue, with slender petals and delicate filaments, breaking through hard winter soil, because each word my father manages to speak is like a tender blossom struggling into the air' (Traxler 2007, 16).

By allowing us to express our experiences not only through language but also through form, poetry may vent both what can and what cannot be said. After all, language and form are inextricably intertwined in this genre. As Tafdrup once said, a poem 'must demonstrate' its topic in its 'choice of words, [...] and all the way into the sentence construction. [...] The poem's being must be realized in its figure. I find that poetry is a unique linguistic possibility in order to be what is being spoken about' (O'Callaghan 2013, 102). This way,

[p]oems are able of something neither science, philosophy, psychology, sociology, religious teachings nor any other institution can do. Poems are no better, but by their means they are able to move and disturb in a specific way. [...] Where science, philosophy, psychology, sociology and religion each have their discourse to speak *about* reality, poetry differs by not primarily pointing, but *being*.

Tafdrup 2017 [1991], 108, original emphasis, my translation³

When it comes to dementia, poetry's potential of 'being' instead of 'pointing' may instantly make visible what it means to lead a life marked by oblivion – a state that Timo Brandt quite beautifully describes as follows:

² In this regard, note also Hanna Zeilig's (2014, 172) observation that '[t]hrough its appeal to our imaginations and empathy, poetry brings into focus those slant truths that lie to the side of our vision'.

³ The genre's openness towards the grey area between what a person wants to say and is able to say is also used in the work with patients suffering from dementia, with the goal to prevent patients being excluded from communication because of their symptoms. See: The Alzheimer's Poetry Project (undated); see also Garrie et al. 2016; Janson 2005, 655.

We are cast from memories and you can notice, you can feel the cast rusting, becoming brittle in some places, but it can also happen that everything suddenly melts away in a heat one cannot do anything about. Gaps built between memories and present and past merge in the defluent flow of memory, a dreadful variation on the symbol of Heraclitus.

Brandt undated, my translation

In *Tarkovsky's Horses*, the poems' condensed⁴ and fragmentary form which time and again cause voids in need of interpretation ultimately seems like a mirror of the demented person's jagged state of memories and narratives. Next to that, also the poetic narrative's macrostructure can be read as a link between clinical symptom and poetic style, in which the gutters between the individual poems can be understood as a visual portrayal of the demential gaps of memory and narration. By visually mirroring the demential game of lost and not-found, Tafdrup's poems not least correspond with the genre's tendency

to focus on particular moments, individuals and details in order to illuminate the general experience. The business of poetry is distinct from prose, it hopes to show rather than 'tell' us about a state or condition and searches for insights that are not obvious, in order to make us 'feel'. It works upon us subtly. Poetry extends our understanding through the force of emotional logic and therefore helps us to feel that dementia sufferers are more than a host of objectified medical symptoms.

Zeilig 2014, 173

In this regard, the fractures in poetic language and form – the symbols and metaphors, the enjambments and stanzas, the blank spaces between the texts⁵ – cannot only express the demented person's aphasic or even mute search for words, memories, and persons but can also shed light on the psychosocial 'symptoms' dementia may cause in relatives. One may just think of the gaps in the storyline of *Tarkovsky's Horses*, which make this book a loosely connected account of beginnings and endings: childhood memories from a far distant past alternate with glimpses of a presence coined by disease, dying and death; stories from the father's youth contrast with his age and ageing; love stories are

⁴ As Tafdrup once said: 'Poetry is the most concentrated form of language, the most sublime, human beings have developed' (Tafdrup 2016, my translation).

⁵ All of which can be found in quite similar form both in the Danish original and the English translation.

narrated by the poles of beginning love and final separation – but where is the middle in all of this? What about school, education, work? Engagement, marriage, (grand-)children? Celebrations, farewells, rituals, daily routines? Cultural or global events that impact one's life? Instead of showing the in-between, the fractured storyline of *Tarkovsky's Horses* displays the lapses of memory that cannot only be noted in the sick person him- or herself, but also in a relative trying to grasp a ceasing present by its apparently opposed origins.⁶

2. Language, literature, and dementia

With regard to Tafdrup, her father's death caused a sudden caesura in the daughter's work: 'My father died on 3 June 2005. It had been arranged a year in advance that I would spend one month in Berlin in July 2005 to write. The only thing that came out of my pen was "FATHER . . ."' (Tafdrup 2011, 10, original emphasis, my translation). The poet is bereft of language, only left with one word, a word, however, that expresses the essence of what the deceased meant to her, regardless of his medical condition. The quote's focus on words and writing is also in line with the poetic portrayal of fatherhood in *Tarkovsky's Horses*. For throughout the book, the lyrical speaker selects memories where a shared affinity for language and literature can be seen as one of the building blocks of the father–daughter relationship: it was the father who taught the lyrical speaker the power of words, who introduced her to the world of literature, and who encouraged her first philosophical thoughts.⁷ Constantly interspersed references to, e.g., literature and mythology give additional weight to this emphasis on issues of intellect as a joining bond between parent and child, which ultimately cumulated in the daughter's vocation as a writer. That

⁶ This phenomenon can also be noted in other approaches to dementia. In Edward Hirsch's (2009 [2003], 132) poem 'Wheeling My Father through the Alzheimer's Ward' (2003), for instance, a son's visit to his demented father triggers childhood memories that contrast the nearing end of their relationship.

⁷ See, e.g.: 'I read stories / my father once gave me' (Tafdrup 2010, 124); '– *The body has at least one wound* / is the first whole sentence I remember / my father addressing to me, / in those days when I had just begun / to get to know the world. / I was four years old / and took part / in my life's / first philosophical discussion' (142, original emphasis); 'Beloved was my father, / and the first person in the world / to whom I gave a name -- / in the form of a self-ignited / sound, / before I could utter the word / "father"' (153). For the biographical background of this emphasis see Tafdrup 2011, 10–11.

the father's former affinity for language and literature is eventually irretrievably impaired by the demential decrease of his mental power and language faculty,⁸ stands in harsh contrast to this portrayal. This is further strengthened by the fact that this portrait is not written in prose but in the form of poetry, a genre commonly associated with a most elaborated linguistic and literary proficiency.

With that said, it seems standing to reason that the emphasis on language, literature, and intellect sheds immediate light on core features of the sick person's personality, values, or mindset. However, when it comes to illness narratives – not only with regard to those written in poetic form –, the impact clinical symptoms may have on aesthetic representations calls for a certain aloofness: after all, topoi, motifs, or techniques that are either particularly close or opposed to the disease in question may inevitably make us wonder in how far this depiction emanated from certain – witting or unwitting – aesthetic norms or ideals: does a pathography present us with a 'realistic', wholistic portrayal of a person or are the traits that were most changed by the disease highlighted out of proportion? Would a character be attributed to different professions and affinities if the respective book or movie were centred on a different disease? For instance, how strongly would aspects like sports be emphasized if limited motor skills were the most central symptom of Alzheimer's? How many musicians would one find in literary or filmic dementia narratives if hearing loss were one of the disease's key clinical signs?

Be it non-fictional or fictional, be it in poetic or narrative form, be it a book, a movie, or a play, the aesthetic of illness narratives can usually not be separated from the clinical symptoms in question. The narrative *is* the disease, it is 'infected' by its symptoms in language, imagery, and form. By highlighting language and literature in the context of dementia, *Tarkovsky's Horses* inevitably inscribes itself in a topos common in both the fictional and non-fictional discourse of dementia. Lisa Genova's novel *Still Alice* (2007) or Felix Mitterer's drama *Der Panther* [The Panther] (2007) are, for example, both centred on Alzheimer's patients who are former professors of linguistics or literature, respectively. In Alice Munro's short story 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' (1999) and Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001), it is again one of

⁸ See, e.g.: 'My father doesn't remember how well-read / he is' (p. 107); 'The mouth is open, the words / sleepless circles in the water: / The things I can neither / ask my father about / any more / nor please him with' (Tafdrup 2010, 152).

the relatives who held a professorship in literature. Also in non-fiction one can notice a distinct focus on language, literature, and intellect, e.g., in *Demenz. Abschied von meinem Vater* [*Dementia. Farewell to My Father*] (2009), a pathography written by journalist Tilman Jens about his father, the philologist, literary historian, professor of rhetoric and writer Walter Jens, or John Bayley's remembrance of his wife, the famous writer Iris Murdoch, in *Elegy for Iris* (1999). In *Der alte König in seinem Exil* [*The Old King in his Exile*] (2011), Arno Geiger's homage to his demented father August Geiger, the reference to literature can again be understood as part of a narrative technique, in which a plethora of intertextual quotes contrastingly demonstrates the pathological rhetoric of Alzheimer's while at the same time creating an upvaluing closeness to the rhetoric of high literature. Against this backdrop, the idea suggests itself that when it comes to narratives of Alzheimer's and dementia, matters of language, literature, and intellect serve as a contrast medium to the disease and its symptomatic loss of memory and linguistic mastery, in which the antithetical topos of former ability vs. current inability creates a drastic, instantly comprehensible – and, when speaking from a strictly literary perspective: aesthetically satisfying – imagery inevitably linked with one of the central clinical signs of dementia.⁹

3. Intertexts as side narratives

When it comes to narratives of diseases like dementia, a focus on language, literature, and intellect may thus tell us more about the disease itself than the people affected by it, be it the patients, relatives or health care providers. Therefore, when trying to get a better understanding of the individual story hidden behind the clinical symptoms, one has to take a closer look at the particularities of such foci. In *Tarkovsky's Horses*, it is most notably the poems'

⁹ Even though this chapter is not the place to develop further on it, one might argue that the (pop-cultural) play with such an antagonism may contribute to the distorted perception of dementia as a disease of intellectuals, while at the same time disregarding the plight of patients from different backgrounds. Apart from this, the focus on the 'demented intellectual' may also evoke the implicit notion that the clinical symptoms of dementia may weigh more heavily on some persons than on others; as a result, there is not least the risk that respective literature or movies cause some sort of an elitist compassion topos that goes hand in hand with a hierarchizing re- or devaluation of certain patient groups linked to specific sociocultural and socioeconomical backgrounds.

intertextual, symbolically charged side narratives that give insight into the lyrical speaker's specific perspective on dementia and fatherhood. Not all of these references can and must be dealt with here; there are however three intertexts that require a closer look in the context of this paper: the reference to the character of the (stupid) Auguste, to Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky and associated concepts of masculinity, and eventually to the mythological bond between Orpheus and Eurydice.

3.1 Stupid August(e): Common connotations of Alzheimer's

In *Tarkovsky's Horses*, intertextual references are oftentimes found almost inconspicuously, as if incidentally interspersed in the poems, as the following excerpt may illustrate:

The house has collapsed,
 the doorbell doesn't work,
 the coat is gone from the hook.
Ach, du lieber Augustin . . . [O, you dear Augustin]
 [...]

 Walks and walks
 to meet the endless beginning.
 THE TONGUE IN FLAMES.
Alles ist weg, weg, weg . . . [Everything's gone, gone, gone . . .]

121, original emphasis¹⁰

The poem depicts a situation familiar to those acquainted to life with dementia: the disease has ravaged the once guarding shelter of the private home, and everyday objects are constant reminders of the apraxic impotence caused by dementia, which does, however, not protect the father from losing himself in the inside and the outside, to go astray, until his relative wanders the streets as well, anxiously calling his name, so long, so loud, until the tongue seems to be in flames. Two verses from the Austrian folk song 'O du lieber Augustin' (text

¹⁰ Both the Danish poem and its English translation deviate from the original wording of the Austrian folk song 'O du lieber Augustin' quoted here: while the song's stanzas end with the line 'Alles ist hin,' which translates not only as 'Everything is gone' but also bears the notion that everything is 'kaputt' or 'broken,' the change of adverb ('Alles ist weg' / 'Everything is gone') puts a stronger focus on the aspect of loss – and thus on one of the core symptoms of dementia.

ca. 1679, composition ca. 1800) have lost their way into this everyday chaos of dementia, bringing the father into sudden closeness with someone who – right down to the song's last stanzas – is constantly chased by bad luck:

Every day's been a feast
 Now all is plague diseased
 Just one big corpse's feast
 Everything's ceased.
 Augustin, o come on,
 Now your grave's close upon,
 Augustin, o come on,
 Dear, all is gone.

Hauptmann et al. 2010, 96, my translation

In the context of dementia, the name Augustin opens up a sombre innuendo to Alois Alzheimer's famous patient Auguste D., who played a pivotal role in the understanding and definition of this disease. Through the link between the ill and the ill-fated alluded to, the father becomes indirectly associated with someone whose lot is hopeless: once happy, he is now doomed to fail, and only death will put an end to his misery. The image is further strengthened by the homonymity of Augustin, Auguste D., and the Auguste, a type of clown that always fails, a warm-hearted, but foolish, silly character, haunted by bad luck. As both in the poem's Danish and English version the song's lyrics are quoted in the original language, this connotation receives further weight by the fact that in German the clown's name is usually called with the epithet – less *ornans* than *humilians* – 'Dummer August' ['Stupid Auguste']. Nevertheless, the reference to the ever so ill-fated character(s) – or rather caricature(s) – of Augustin/Auguste adds a surprisingly humoristic side to the poem's depiction of the father. After all, originally written in major scale, the song does not set the melancholically and bitter counterpoint one might expect in view of the poem's otherwise bleak stance towards a life shaped by dementia. Instead, the song's somehow tragicomical tone connotes its poetic context with a grim sense of humour as if to say – in an almost sarcastic way – to make the best of this demential catch-22. At the same time, in light of the great popularity 'O du lieber Augustin' enjoys as a children's song, the reference also seems like a reminiscence to the daughter's blithe days of childhood, where she could think herself safe in the protecting care of the father.

But these happy days are now gone, gone, gone . . . Now it is the child calling out for the father, searching for him, taking care of his safety, while being constantly aware of the threat of his impending death. The image of a child's care for a father, who due to his disease is no longer able to fulfil roles formerly associated with fatherhood, evokes common perceptions of dementia as an inversion of both familial roles.¹¹ The demented father's childlike clumsiness, his ill-fated situation that is doomed to result in his downfall, is ironically increased when considering the origins of the name 'August', with which the father is connoted in the poem: Deriving from Augustus (lat. 'the esteemed, the venerable'), the traditional male title of Roman emperors, the name attributes an aura of inherent dignity and majesty to the father.¹² By the intertextually triggered allusions to the hapless Augustin, the clown 'Stupid Auguste', the historic patient Auguste D., and the ancient emperor's title Augustus, the father is thus characterized by a complex interplay of connotations that can ultimately be encapsulated in the image of the pitiable downfall of the erstwhile majestic: once the noble and grand emperor in the child's kingdom, a dignitary she admiringly looked up to, who was almost invincible in his power when protecting her from harm and hardship, the previously august father has now turned to a demented Auguste.

3.2 Tarkovsky's horses: Cruelties of dementia

The ironic image of the downfall of a former majesty is turned to an extreme by the book's linkage of dementia with Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky and his movie *Andrei Rublev* (1969). Explicitly cited in the titles of Tafdrup's book and its very last poem (2010, 159), and accompanied by additional allusions throughout the book, the intertextual reference to Tarkovsky, 'the poet of apocalypse', (Quandt 2018) and this movie is one of the most highlighted in Tafdrup's poetic illness narrative – and ultimately connects it with gender-based images of male cruelty in times of vulnerability. This is particularly

¹¹ In this regard, note also the comparison of dementia narratives with a '*Bildungsroman* in reverse' (Hartung 2016, 170–220).

¹² Arno Geiger's *Der alte König in seinem Exil* [*The Old King in his Exile*] entails a similar comparison, which is evoked by the explicit reference to the demented father, whose first name is indeed August, as an 'old king'.

triggered by one of the most violent and controversial scenes in *Andrei Rublev*, a (film) shot of a horse falling down a flight of stairs, overturning several times, and eventually, when lying injured on the ground, being stabbed to death by soldiers. The gruesomeness of the cinematic picture is increased by the scene's real background, as Tarkovsky had the animal fetched from a slaughterhouse, shot in the neck for the filming, this way causing the fall of the once majestic creature that was finally stabbed and killed with another headshot (Fenech undated; Lipkov 1967). In the context of Tafdrup's poetic dementia narrative, the reference to Tarkovsky's horses thus evokes an image of male exercises of power, where strength is ostentatiously demonstrated by a – presumably self-proclaimed – right to torture and even to decide on life and death.¹³ What makes this even more cruel is the fact that the brutal behaviour is not directed against an equal opponent, but a vulnerable being, an 'innocent victim [] of [its] association with man', (Johnson and Petrie 1994, 214) as Tarkovsky once described his symbolic perception of horses.

In Tafdrup's book, this image of (male) demonstrations of power is intertwined with the disease of dementia, which is depicted as an almost human agent charged with stereotypical male attributes: like a personified attack against allegedly core attributes of masculinity, dementia forces a once-powerful dignitary – Augustus – to his knees, takes the sick man's power and strength, and continues to fight him despite his defeated vulnerability. The connotation of the disease with stereotypical male attributes such as aggressiveness, cruelty, and mercilessness is juxtaposed with the book's otherwise striking focus on female care and compassion: apart from the father and his only briefly mentioned brother and son, hardly any male characters, e.g. physicians, friends, or colleagues, can be found in the poems; instead, the father is primarily shown in relationships to women, in particular his – already deceased – mother, his wife, and his daughter, the lyrical speaker.¹⁴ As both his

¹³ Also with regard to Andrei Tarkovsky himself; after all, Tafdrup's book is not titled *Rublev's* or *Andrei's Horses* and thus focused on the movie or its characters, but explicitly emphasizes the name of the director.

¹⁴ In correspondence to the book's general emphasis on intertextual references, the men mentioned in the poems are mostly writers, e.g. Gunnar Eklöf, T.S. Eliot, Lars Norén, and Rainer Maria Rilke. The lack of a portrayal of family members does not have to be seen as something negative; in view of the book's biographical roots, such an exclusion can rather be understood as a means to protect their private sphere; see Fürholzer 2019, 105–52, in particular 123–34.

wife and daughter are portrayed as assuming a caring role for the vulnerable and weak father, the idea suggests itself that the book presents us with gender-bound concepts of nursing care. However, despite several allusions to this image, *Tarkovsky's Horses* does not seem to play with any sort of reverse 'paternalization' or 'feminization' of the demented father. Instead, by constantly redirecting the reader's view to the disease itself, the reference to Tarkovsky's horses rather seems like a symbol for the – almost human or even super-human – power and viciousness of a disease that may, out of nowhere, strike us from ambush, cause us to stumble and fall, until we lie helpless on the ground, humiliated in our former majesty, suffering a cruel and painful end of life.

Fortunately, neither Tarkovsky's film nor Tafdrup's poetic illness narrative end with such a gloomy connotation. Instead, in analogy to the last scenes of *Andrei Rublev*, the book's outro poem reveals an imagery of peace and serenity:

In that beauty a horse
displays,
standing in sun
on a grassy field
[...]
With the same exalted peace
Tarkovsky's horses
in *Andrei Rublev*
radiate
in the film's final images,
my father is present,
resting in himself.

Tafdrup 2010, 159

The intertextually sustained symbolic view of horses evoked in this final stanza of the book re-associates the dead father with an erstwhile majesty, grandeur, and beauty that had temporarily fallen into oblivion. As a result, the child's earliest memories of her father as someone powerful, strong, and majestic are depicted as attributes that may be forgotten and – deliberately or not – trampled on, but remain nevertheless an inalienable part of a sick person's self – which ultimately shows them as being more powerful than the ferocity of dementia.

3.3 Orpheus: Relatives in the underworld

In *Tarkovsky's Horses*, the disease's gruesomeness that may strike both the father and his relatives are inevitably linked with the experience of loss: 'The book narrates two kinds of loss: partly the loss my father experienced in form of oblivion, and partly the loss I, his daughter, experienced, as in a way one loses his father while he is still alive. And yet at the same time, one doesn't, as there are only new pages emerging' (Tafdrup 2011, 10, my translation). The association with dementia as a sort of living death concerns both the sick and his relatives – as poet Ragan Fox once stated in light of his father's Alzheimer's disease:

I suppose I have spent the last 10 years mourning the loss of my father. Each time he forgot my name, I mourned. When he forgot to attend my college graduation and said he never remembered being invited, I mourned. When he stopped eating solid foods, I mourned. The tears I expect at the death call have already been spent. I mourned a *dying* father so much that I have no idea how to respond now that he is actually dead.

Fox 2010, 4, original emphasis

According to Jonathan Franzen (2001, 89), 'the most common trope of Alzheimer's: that its particular sadness and horror stem from the sufferer's loss of his or her "self" long before the body dies' is not least fuelled by medial and scientific representations of this disease. Against this backdrop, it will come as no surprise that within the scientific literature, Alzheimer's dementia is sometimes referred to as a sort of 'psychosocial death' (Zarit et al. 1985; Doka and Aber 1989; Furlini 2001) as due to the changes dementia usually evokes, friends and family may encounter patients as if they are already dead despite being still physically alive.

In *Tarkovsky's Horses*, this experience of the living death that can both hit the sick person and his or her relatives is embedded into the repeated reference to Orpheus and Eurydice. Cited both in the book's intro and outro poem, this ancient legend forms the narrated frame for the lyrical speaker's poetic approach towards dementia and her relationship with her father. As an epitome of the doomed search for a lost love, the myth stresses the book's emotional focus on the two poles of despair and love, a love that can, however, not even be broken by – demential – loss. At first glance, Orpheus's loving search for

Eurydice seems like a contrasting juxtaposition of the gender-bound image of male-like power and cruelty evoked by the reference to Tarkovsky. The book's stance on the ancient myth shares, however, a significant commonality with Tarkovsky's apparently opposed counter-text, which is, once again, its focus on the cruel downfall of the innocent, vulnerable, majestic. This connotation is already evoked in the introductory poem 'Darkroom on Immanuelkirchstrasse', in which the lyrical speaker tries to convey her grief into a poetic tribute in memoriam of the deceased father. Like some kind of author's prologue, the poem depicts the challenging writing scene the lyrical speaker is faced with in this regard:

one night in Berlin,
and a piece of paper, filled
with *something* that wants to be called
forth.

Tafdrup 2010, 94; original emphasis

In light of his dementia, however, the search for the father – his personality, his identity, his meaning for her and for others – becomes inextricably linked to a search for her own identity: for what is a daughter when dementia has eliminated the father's memory of his child? Given the cruelty of being dead while still alive, the lyrical speaker in 'Darkroom on Immanuelkirchstrasse' finds herself in the perverted role of Eurydice:

Will Eurydice fetch
her dead father –
like Orpheus sing
of what's lost?
Eurydice, memory,
the eruption.
[...]
Eurydice did have a life, after all.

Tafdrup 2010, 94

In *Tarkovsky's Horses*, dementia perverts relationships. The daughter is looking for her father, but no matter how close she gets to him, the disease condemns them to remain separated. Although among the living, the daughter is already stuck in the underworld of her father's oblivion. In an inversion of

the ancient myth, it is not Orpheus but Eurydice herself who is calling for the loved one, until 'the tongue' is 'in flames' (see above).¹⁵ But despite the poet's particular linguistic and artistic competence, her calling 'song' cannot create a connection between them, no matter how hard she tries to reach the father. Orpheus, still among the living, but nevertheless irreversibly separated from Eurydice, can no longer look out for her. In his world, Eurydice does no longer, or rather: does not at all exist, as, what is worse, she is not dead but inexistent. As in perverted cruelty, dementia can extinguish a life as if this person, this shared relationship, had never existed: 'Eurydice did have a life, after all' – but in contrast to the myth, the dementia-caused death of a relative can be absolute.

In an intense manner, Tafdrup's poems thus broach the anguish dementia's 'psychosocial death' may cause both the sick person and the relatives, as the poem 'Flames Freeze' impressively demonstrates:

– Here is a picture of you,
my father says, handing me
an unfamiliar photo
of my mother, naked, and quite young.
[...]
– And here is our mother,
my father adds cheerfully
handing me a picture
of my grandmother.

Tafdrup 2010, 110

Due to dementia, the daughter becomes the wife, the wife becomes the sister ('our' mother: 'yours and mine').¹⁶ This image confirms common assumptions about dementia: 'Caregivers assume, for example, that when a father does not appear to recognize his daughter, the daughter becomes bereft of a father;

¹⁵ Next to that, transferring the myth to the parent–daughter constellation invokes oedipal resonances (my thanks to Rüdiger Kunow for his intriguing observation of Freudian references notable in various parts of Tafdrup's poetic volume).

¹⁶ An again quite Freudian image. See also 'Whether it's me or my mother / sitting in the chair, / what does it matter? / Whether it's my sister or me, / does it change anything' (Tafdrup 2010, 98), 'but the woman / he loved / has turned into his mother, / and he into the son of his beloved —' (101). While the daughter is buried alive, the wife is married, divorced: when her sick husband is transferred to a nursing home, the spouses' separation is equalled to a divorce, both for the father ('he wants out and away, / wants to go HOME. / [...] / HOME is, / where my mother is', 106, original emphasis) and for the mother, considering that dementia can invert an 'Until death do us part' into a premortal 'Until oblivion do us part'. See, e.g. 121, 110 in this regard.

‘fatherhood’ is defined as an overt social interaction, a performance, rather than an emotional state that may not be expressed’ (Simon 2014, 9). In this regard, the notion that there are a lot more facets to a father that go beyond the roles of a biological begetter, legal guardian, or social parent, is also notable in ‘Flames Freeze’: for even though his family members’ specific relation to him is forgotten, the father is nevertheless still able to recognize their emotional ties. As it is stated a few verses later:

I still remember
everyone I love – – –

Tafdrup 2010, 110¹⁷

Although dementia may assail familial roles, they are not erased but only changed. Even in cases where a father suffering from dementia is no longer able to maintain the legal or social aspects associated with fatherhood, even if the father–child relationship undergoes changes – the father’s neurons may be coated in plaques, but both the plaque-resistant genetics and the emotional ties are able to survive dementia’s oblivion.

4. Conclusion

In a complex interplay of biographical memories and intertextual side narratives that embed the poetic cycle in a broader context, Tafdrup’s poetic illness narrative both confirms and revokes the fictional and non-fictional dementia discourse: while the image of the child taking care of the parent corresponds to certain conceptions of dementia as a disease of loss and inverted roles, there is no suggestion that this change in the relationship leads to a paternalistic form of sick-care nor to an infantilization of the father. Neither does the book attribute the sick man with any sort of feminization: while the book – not least due to its intertextual references to director Tarkovsky and his movie *Andrei Rublev* – implicitly personifies dementia by attributing it with male-like violence and cruelty that forms a contrast to the compassionate care of the father’s female relatives, the family members are not

¹⁷ See also ‘there is only one body in the room, / -- and it is ours, / a family body’ (Tafdrup 2010, 140).

characterized by (stereo-)typically 'male' or 'female' attributes. After all, the father never corresponded to traditional concepts of fatherhood as for example a stern, authoritative father figures such as the *pater familias* or *auctoritas*. Concepts of aggressive or cruel forms of male demonstrations of power and strength are rather contrasted with the power and strength of a father's loving care for his child.

While the disease inevitably changes the father's self and his relationship to his daughter, the poems demonstrate that there are nevertheless facets that are immune to dementia. For despite dementia's destructive impact on the father's love for language and literature, an attribute that is central to the lyrical speaker's understanding of her father and her relationship with him, and despite the disease's gruesome threat to bring down the once majestic, powerful emperor of the child's private realm and turn him into a humiliated, ill-fated clown, doomed to fail, eventually separated by a gap of oblivion from his family, *Tarkovsky's Horses* makes aware that there are aspects of fatherhood that cannot be infected by this illness. As notwithstanding the destructive power of dementia and the losses it may cause, the father will always remain someone who loved and was loved – the emotional ties between parent and child thus continue to exist, regardless of age, gender, or physical state.

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