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Anne Carson, dementia and the negative self

João Paulo Guimarães and Daae Jung

To what extent can one's attitude towards life help mitigate the impact of dementia? In 'Uncle Falling', one of the chapbooks that integrate the *Float* (2016) collection, Canadian poet Anne Carson argues that working against the tendency to exert total control over one's life can provide some protection against the shock of the disease. If the time comes, one should be prepared to let go, or, as the poet points out: 'If you have to fall . . . Do your best to fall . . . In no time at all' ('Uncle' 37). There is, according to Carson, more continuity than one tends to assume between life before and after dementia, especially in what concerns one's control over language and identity, so it might be possible to find traces of post-traumatic subjectivity in our familiar, supposedly normal, lives, perhaps by paying attention to those aspects of the everyday that undermine our control.

Thus, Carson does not seem to think that dementia entails a radical break with the past. Rather, she suggests that self-knowledge and communication had always been impaired from the start, given that language does not disclose the real in a transparent manner and identity is a perennial riddle.¹ 'Uncle Falling', the poetry chapbook that will be the focus of this chapter (although we will sometimes refer to 'A Lecture on Corners', an essay-form lecture in which

¹ The notion that 'all lives are fundamentally opaque' is 'a thread that runs through all of Carson's work' (66), as Joan Fleming points out in her essay about *Nox*. No life is ever normal, straightforward and transparent. In *Nox*, the poet attempts to assemble fragments of her estranged brother's life in order to understand his unexpected death. Wanted by the police, he had left Canada and moved to Europe. From there he would only occasionally contact his family. In the poem, Carson attempts to conjure him by way of letter fragments and remembered phone calls.

Carson talks about her father's dementia), draws extensively on the poetics of Modernist poet Gertrude Stein, indicating that, for Carson, language is not so much a medium of denotative exchange but, more fundamentally, the matrix of memory and subjectivity, a maze of feelings, echoes and questions. Like Stein, Carson foregrounds the slipperiness of the domestic world, at once familiar and strange, a space that both her uncle and father, the central figures of the chapbook, try to master with tragic masculine determination, their desire to hold on to normality paradoxically quickening their descent into dementia.² In this essay, we will put Carson's text in conversation with the work recently done by French philosopher Catherine Malabou and psychoanalysis scholar Slavoj Žižek on the topic at hand, our aim being to ascertain to what extent the strange worlds of Carson and Stein can make more navigable the domain of dementia, often cast as radically unfamiliar.³

'Uncle Falling' is the longest of the twenty-two chapbooks that compose *Float* (2016), Anne Carson's most recent print release. The title of the project comes from the chapbook 'Cassandra Float Can', which features the Greek prophetess Cassandra as a central character and in which 'floating' thus appears as a symbol of artistic and philosophical insight, by way of prophecy ('Everywhere Cassandra ran Cassandra found she could float (. . .). Everywhere Cassandra ran she found she was already there': 1–2). Prophetic language, with its tautologies, its enigmatic incoherence and playful logic, is one of the key

² 'Uncle Falling' and 'A Lecture on Corners' are not the only places where Carson has written about her father's dementia. In 'The Anthropology of Water', Carson compares her relation to her sick father to that between a pilgrim and a saint. In her article about the poem, 'The Pilgrim and the Riddle', Tanis MacDonald notes that Carson sets up an analogy between the demented parent's elliptic speech and the indecipherable speech of a shrine's divinity. Her father had always been private (his puzzling silence is something Carson insists upon in the two works we analyse here), so in 'The Anthropology of Water' the poet places him in the domain of the sacred. Her father's remoteness makes it impossible for her to mourn him in a satisfactory manner. About this MacDonald says: 'The father remains beyond the reach of the narrator's love, even as she strives to read him as an untranslated (and ultimately untranslatable) text that will not yield traditional consolation' (1).

³ In her book entitled *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, Catherine Malabou mounts a strong attack on psychoanalysis through her neurobiologically informed reading of patients with brain traumas such as dementia, post-traumatic stress disorder, and brain injury. The philosopher argues that the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious is inadequate to account for these types of brain traumas and becomes theoretically redundant in the face of the neurobiological affirmations of the emotional brain and neuroplasticity. In a critical review of *The New Wounded* entitled 'Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject', Žižek claims that in her otherwise robust reading of Freud, Malabou misses out the fact that what she calls, the 'new wounded' – the subject profoundly transformed by a brain trauma – is already implicated in the psychoanalytic account of the death drive.

themes of *Float* as a whole, including ‘Uncle Falling’, which can, as we will see, be seen as a meditation on the potential poetic qualities of dementia patients’ cryptic speech. But we also find echoes of the main title of the collection in another chapbook called ‘108 (floatage)’, a term that refers to assorted objects that float on the water and which thus epitomizes Carson’s encyclopaedic, omnivorous, and paratactic approach to poetic composition. *Float* contains a bit of everything: humorous rewrites of ancient Greek myths and plays (‘Zeusbits’, about the Olympian’s escapades in modern capitalist society, and ‘Pinplay’, a brief postmodern/absurdist take on Euripides’ ‘Bacchae’), paeans to the memory of lost family members (‘Powerless Structures Fig II’, about her aimless brother and the Danish wife he left behind, and ‘Uncle Falling’), texts that put a spin on traditional poetic forms (‘Possessives Used as Drink: A Lecture in the Form of 15 Sonnets’) or follow a miscellaneous list format (‘Stacks’ and ‘Maintenance’), tributes to other artists (‘Eras of Yves Klein’), and poems that reflect upon different kinds of discrimination towards women (‘Pronoun Envy’, ‘Contempts’ and ‘Variations on the Right to Remain Silent’). Of greatest interest to us are ‘How to Like “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” by Gertrude Stein’ and ‘Nelligan’, the first because it is a humorous instruction manual on how to appreciate the work of Gertrude Stein, a figure who has a prominent role throughout ‘Uncle Falling’, and the second because it collects a set of translations of poems from French-Canadian author Émille Nelligan, who was diagnosed with dementia praecox when he was twenty, a tragic event which foreshortened his artistic life, which ended up lasting less than a decade.

It is important to make clear from the beginning that Carson does not set out to challenge the prevalent view of dementia as a disease that robs the person of his or her identity. The perspective she offers us is that of a relative who sees her father and uncle get progressively worse and thus unable to communicate or recall their past lives. This is an angle that lies in stark contrast with that which, for example, Ulla Kriebnernegg explores in her paper about Arno Geiger’s *The Old King in His Exile*.⁴ There Kriebnernegg argues that Geiger tries to develop an improvisational relationship with his father as he adopts a

⁴ For a reading of Geiger’s dementia memoir in the context of ageing masculinities, see Michaela Schrage-Früh’s chapter in this volume.

new kind of self, changing his habits and his personality. The scholar figures this as a more humane and productive kind of relationship (the son chooses not to insist on the father's past identity) with a person with dementia. Although Carson mentions, in passing, a few adjustments she had to make in order to accommodate her father's condition (in 'Corners' she says they communicate most successfully when they speak in 'word salad'), she mostly seeks to describe and understand the latter's cognitive decline. She does not seem to think that it is possible to develop more than a mere surface-level relationship with a person with dementia.

Towards the end of the chapbook, Carson suggests that the most one can hope for when it comes to dementia is a kind of prophylactic protection, something that softens the blow (40). The metaphorical example she uses is Achilles' legendary helmet, whose 'exceptionally fine and close-textured' (38) lining (made with a rare kind of sponge) appears to mirror the poetic mesh Carson evokes throughout the piece with her continuous references to the style of Gertrude Stein. The stories and reflections that make up 'Uncle Falling' are interspersed with a series of chorus sections in which four voices, all belonging to Gertrude Stein, comment on the progressive unravelling of the mental health of Carson's father and uncle. Riffing off Stein's penchant for colourful wordplay, these sections unfold as a string of puns, tangents and gnomic statements that might constitute an attempt, on Carson's part, to evoke, albeit in a benign and humorous fashion, the state of confusion that dementia patients find themselves in.⁵

With its chorus, use of masks, different speaking parts and references to ancient myth, Carson frames the chapbook 'Uncle Falling' with reference to Greek drama. Madness is one of the central themes of 'Uncle Falling', not only

⁵ In her 'Two Stein Talks' (a print version of which was released in her essay collection *The Language of Inquiry*), American poet Lyn Hejinian claims that the dynamism of Stein's poetry is not so much that of the traditional 'stream of consciousness'. Rather, because it is jerky, discontinuous, filled with stops and starts, her writing is closer to bird flight, the alternative metaphor that William James uses to describe the motions of thought in his groundbreaking essay 'Stream of Thought': 'As we take (...) a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is [the] different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alteration of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period' (qtd. in Hejinian 121). Stein studied psychology under William James in her youth and, as Steven Meyer reminds us in his book about the poet, her writing attempts to capture what James called 'knowledge of acquaintance' (Meyer 14) i.e., the imprecise but nonetheless rich experience one has when one interacts with an object without attempting to describe it (which James calls 'knowledge about').

because both its male characters are mentally ill but also because the chorus speaks in the 'mad' style of Gertrude Stein. In ancient tragedy, the chorus was composed by members of some group that was outside of mainstream political life (slaves, foreigners, women or old men that no longer could participate in warfare). The chorus was tasked with commenting on the action, suggested how the audience might react to this or that scene, and expressed certain hidden fears of the main characters. In 'Uncle Falling', the multiple Gertrude Stein parts, with their wordplay, nonsensical asides and gnomic pronouncements, at once convey how far Carson's father and uncle have moved from the realm of everyday discourse and voice their and our confusion when confronted with the damage done by dementia.

Both Carson's uncle and father are depicted throughout the book as having a fondness for orderliness and a need to map and understand the world. Ironically, this compulsion, Carson notes, becomes more pronounced as their disease progresses. For example, we are told that, before falling ill, her father had the habit of keeping a record of his transactions and of making lists (for example, of wines and recommended pairings or of words he had to look up in the dictionary while reading). For his part, Carson's uncle Harry was an avid collector of the *National Geographic*: 'Living for Harry was knowing how things work' (7), the poet notes. As he starts getting worse, her father's need to control his environment intensifies. For example, he began writing down everything he did during the day. As Carson points out in 'Corners', he started

to pin down every moment of his day by writing little scribbled notes to himself, mapping out almost simultaneously with his life, the landscape of every action, responsibility or fear. 'Turn out the lamp; Put the keys in the drawer; Go eat supper.' We found these notes all over the house after he was gone, in books, in his pockets, under the cat's dish, behind the clock. He was going for control.

n. p.

When he moves in with Carson, he becomes possessive towards her:

I had begun to wake up earlier and earlier in the morning to avoid dad. No sooner did he hear me in the kitchen than he appeared, dressed in pajamas and fedora, to begin the barrage of questioning that was his defense against

inner chaos. He needed to control something. And if I were going for a walk, he needed to know every twist and turn of the route I would take.

‘Corners’ n.p.⁶

The references to her uncle and father’s graspingness are offset, throughout ‘Uncle Falling’, by the sections that evoke the spirit of Gertrude Stein. Stein stands for the uncertain, partial or provisional, that which eludes categorization and control. Stein’s poems do not so much describe the real as they open it up for exploration, testing the boundaries between objects and individuals by blending them with things and people with which they maintain perceptual, mnemonic or conceptual affinities.

Consider, for example, the first poem from *Tender Buttons*, ‘A Carafe’, that is a Blind Glass’, perhaps the most cited piece from that book:

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

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Here Stein takes a familiar domestic object – a carafe – and renders it strange: she invites us to see it as an abstract shape or a class of objects (‘a kind’) which, when decontextualized, might be geometrically comparable to other objects of the same family (‘a cousin’), perhaps other bottles or types of glassware. Although she is describing a carafe, Stein thus diverts our attention to an unspecified array of other objects (‘the difference is spreading’). A carafe looks like other things but, at the same time, it is also a unique object (‘not unordered in not resembling’), marvellous in its irreducible specificity. The phrases ‘A blind glass’ and ‘a single hurt color’ tell us that the carafe is full – with red wine, possibly, dark and opaque – but the adjectives (‘blind’ and ‘hurt’) Stein uses to convey this endow the scene with a strange emotional quality.

⁶ Carson also suggests that, because it compromises their ability to take care of themselves, dementia deprives her relatives of their masculine habits, or at least makes them depend on someone else’s judgement, turning them into matters of permission or negotiation. For example, once his sister becomes his caretaker, she effects ‘a reordering of [uncle] Harry’s life. Three meals a day. Clean underwear. No cursing. There were points on which they agreed to disagree like Harry’s admiration for starting the day with a tot of whiskey’ (‘Uncle Falling’ 9).

According to American avant-gardist Charles Bernstein, Stein's poems 'elide past and future in favor of continuous presents. As when paintings collapse figures onto ground so that the action of the painting occurs on the same page, without the subordination of perspective, Stein's compositional space, in her most radical works, collapses the separation of viewing and viewed, seer and seen' (85).⁷ In other words, her poetry is not 'realistic', in the conventional nineteenth-century sense of the term; it does not try to describe reality objectively. Rather, Stein's objects are constellations of sense and memory impressions. Bernstein notes that 'Meaning [in *Tender Buttons*] is not something to be extracted or deciphered but rather to be responded to (...). The more readers can associate with the multiple vectors of each word or phrase meanings, the more fully they can feast on the unfolding semantic banquet of the work' (88). *Tender Buttons* is not, that is, a mass of information that the reader needs to process but a sort of playground where we can lose ourselves, with very little in the way of fixed rules of engagement. Stein shows us that even the things we think we know best, namely domestic objects and spaces, often dismissed, then as now, as belonging to the sphere of the feminine, are ultimately rich and elusive.

However, if, as Carson points out in her lecture on 'Corners', 'the lure of the abyss can be domesticated' and one does not 'have to hit the ground to experience cornerless space', we can say that in Stein's poetry we encounter at once the abyss of the domestic and a domesticated abyss. While Stein's work may indeed confuse us, hers is nonetheless a controlled sort of confusion, not to be mistaken, as Carson warns in her poem, with a truly traumatic mode of experience, such as that occasioned by dementia. In 'Uncle Falling', the poet brings up the work of choreographer Elizabeth Streb to make the point that the kind of danger we find in art, no matter how extreme, is ultimately very different from that of real life. Streb's dancers practise falling from a great height but, despite the daring and risky nature of their craft, their experience is of a highly controlled sort:

Elizabeth Streb is a Brooklyn choreographer who teaches her dancers to fall straight down from a height of thirty-two feet, flat on their faces or flat on

⁷ As we will see, according to Carson, there are similarities between the language of Stein and that of dementia patients. Similar to what happens in a Stein poem, dementia patients are not able to correctly differentiate subject and object: 'Demented people do not seem to experience the self as a shelter. There is some basic animal certainty – that you are who you are and it's ok – that is deleted from them. No more dialectic of inside and outside. You are simply exposed' ('Corners').

their backs or sideways through the air as if flying. They fall as fast as stars and look like gods in an instant. They redeem the shame of falling, an act we usually associate with being very young or very old or very lost or not master of oneself. They bounce beautifully and regather control of their bodies and motions almost at once. To watch them fall fills you with an inexpressible odd longing. Perhaps it is the longing for what Streb calls 'a real move.' Her dancers do not perform this, they imitate it only. 'A real move would rip the flesh off your bones,' she says, 'a human being could not inhabit it.'

35

Carson thus appears to be making the claim that the experience of dementia is of a radically different kind from what we find in works of art that attempt to capture it. This argument is similar to the one philosopher Catherine Malabou makes in her book *The New Wounded*. There Malabou considers patients with various types of brain traumas from Alzheimer's disease and autism to brain injury as 'the new wounded.' According to Malabou, in spite of their different etiological origins, 'they all display permanent or temporary behaviors of indifference or disaffection' (10). Malabou asserts that degenerative brain diseases such as dementia generate a new kind of subject, one that is governed by the death drive and thus by the gradual obliteration of memory and identity.⁸ The new subject forged by dementia, she contends, lives death as a form of life. Contra Freud, the philosopher figures traumatic events like dementia as meaningless intrusions of external reality on subjectivity (Freud argued that such events always resonate with our internal reality, namely, in this case, our masochistic desires).⁹ According to Malabou, the brain in no way anticipates the possibility of

⁸ While Malabou's approach is largely informed by the recent development in brain studies, she simultaneously points out that neurobiology fails to sufficiently theorize what she calls the 'destructive plasticity' of the brain – a type of plasticity that destroys its existing form and assumes the very form of this destruction. According to Malabou, clinical works by such neurologists as Alexander Luira and Oliver Sacks fall short of accounting for the radical *rupture* that patients with dementia or brain injury undergo. For Malabou, these scientists cling too much to the idea of 'narrativizing' the disease as she explains, 'Neurology, then, must become a "romantic science" by defining itself as neuropsychology – which would take into account the "biography" of its patients' (186). While commending these scientists for their humane effort, Malabou nonetheless insists upon the necessity of theorizing a 'plasticity without remedy' to fully confront the 'incursion of the negative' that new wounded subjects embody (188).

⁹ According to Malabou, contemporary neurobiology fundamentally calls into question Freud's hypothesis that every external shock is 'translated into the language of endogenous events' (Malabou 7) through the intervention of the psychic apparatus governed by a libidinal economy. Contrary to what Freud affirms, the philosopher argues, cerebral damages that affect dementia patients or trauma victims do not take hermeneutic detours through a pre-existing sexual conflict or fantasy. In contrast to sexuality as an aetiological origin of neurosis, Malabou writes, 'cerebrality is thus the causality of a neutral and destructive accident-without reason' (9).

its own destruction. The person that suffers from dementia thus undergoes a transformation that nothing could have prepared him or her for.

In his response to Malabou's theory, Slavoj Žižek argues that that is not the case. To be sure, the demented self may lose all libidinal investment in the world, as Malabou contends, but the subjectivity that results from dementia is not something radically new. Rather, Žižek maintains, it is a more primal/foundational form of selfhood, one defined by negation, albeit not a positive kind of negation (meaningful or formative) like that which makes up the frustrating desires that drive traditional neurotic subjects (I desire not this, not that, but always something else). In his own words: 'The de-libidinized subject effectively is the pure subject of the death drive: in it, only the empty frame of death drive as the formal condition of libidinal investment survives, deprived of all its content' (23). Žižek reproaches Malabou for focusing too much on the traumatic 'content' (a cerebral wound that erases one's memories and personhood) and neglecting the very *form* of subjectivity that in the first place entails the radical negation of any substance (27). There is, nevertheless, some continuity between these two types of negativity, which explains why Žižek opposes Malabou's neat opposition of the pleasure principle vis-à-vis the death drive.¹⁰ For Žižek, a form of pleasure that is purely positive (like, say, a dementia patient's enjoyment of a certain food) is of a different nature from what he calls desire, which always involves an element of negation.

This latter form of positive negativity is visibly on display in Gertrude Stein's poetry, especially *Tender Buttons*, marked as it is by the constant variability of its object of focus, the discontinuity of the observer's attention and her tendency to digress. The syntactic (dis)order of Stein's world, however, has very little to do with the kind of 'word salad' Carson uses to communicate with her sick father. As Malabou points out, the speech of a dementia patient has no revelatory meaning, despite its being mangled and cryptic and thus similar to

¹⁰ While Freud speculates about whether there is a 'beyond' of the pleasure principle, as documented in his 1920 essay, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Malabou claims he ultimately fails to formulate it because of his inability to conceive of a pure destruction, what she calls, a 'death of the drive' within the psychic economy. As Malabou explains, 'The limit of psychoanalysis is its failure to admit the existence of a beyond of the pleasure principle. This beyond, which would also be the beyond of all healing, of all possible therapy, never appears in Freud's text' (189). Yet, Žižek responds to Malabou on this point by highlighting that for Freud, the death drive is not another opposing force with regard to the libido or the pleasure principle but it rather indicates a constitutive impasse of the pleasure principle that governs human sexuality.

what we find in an avant-garde text like Stein's. Dementia patients may indeed speak the language of prophecy, but it is of a malignant kind, its negativity no longer a creative and constructive force. As Malabou asserts, dementia's negativity is destructively plastic, in the explosive sense of the word. According to Žižek, patients are reduced to shells of their former selves. Carson makes a similar statement in her abovementioned lecture, highlighting how, although a gradual but nonetheless radical and irreversible transformation has taken place, on the surface everything remains the same:

The starving brain is surprised. It doesn't know itself or know the world. It keeps arriving at difficulty. Difficulty is dealt with in different ways by different brains. And all of this happens bewilderingly gradually. A common feature is to keep pretending everything is normal as long as possible. You know what daily life is supposed to sound like and look like and taste like. You can put that surface together, keep it running, long after there stops being anything inside. You can act the parts.

'Corners' n.p.

Contrary to the majority of humanities scholars that do research on dementia, Carson does not appear to see a silver lining in terms of how the disease affects older people and their caretakers. For her, the central issue is not so much how to live with dementia but how to prepare for it, loosening our grasp over those things that provide us with a secure sense of self, the kind of (masculine) fixation with control that is, in 'Uncle Falling', emblemized by the father and the uncle. It is here that Stein's poetry, unpredictable, whimsical and disorienting, might provide a model. If the floor might crumble beneath our feet at any moment, then, at least, as denizens of her fallen feminine world, we might learn how to be better prepared when the time comes to take the plunge.

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