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# Stories of Exile and Home: Dementia and Masculinity in Arno Geiger's *Der alte König in seinem Exil* and Ian Maleney's *Minor Monuments*

Michaela Schrage-Früh

## Introduction

Dementia epitomises the cultural fear of old age since its typical symptoms of cognitive decline are often equated with the loss of personality and a person's "social death" (Hartung 2016, 179; cf. also Trevitt 2006, 109). This fear is illustrated by Sinéad Gleeson's drastic comments in an essay about her aunt's dementia: "I fear losing my mind more than I do dying. I'd take a shark attack and falling from a height and being stabbed before I'd take my mind being hijacked and replaced with clouds. I would take another round of cancer over untreatable dementia. [...] I'd take that over my family watching my personality, my memory, me drift – unreachable – to the bottom of some sea" (Gleeson 2019, 223-224). Gleeson's essay articulates the widespread horror that a diagnosis of "untreatable dementia" equals death in life. Hers is the perspective of a family member comparing her cognitively impaired aunt to the person she was "[b]efore illness stole her from us" (Gleeson 2019, 224). Gleeson's view, however, is surely also shaped by the predominantly negative "sociocultural construction of dementia" (Zeilig 2013, 258), including popular metaphors that dehumanise and stigmatise people living with the disease as mindless zombies or "living dead" (cf. Behuniak 2011, 71), turning them into "strange, and even frightening, others" (DeFalco 2010, 54). Yet, as Arno Geiger notes, "Kein Demenzkranker ist wie der andere, oft sind Verallgemeinerungen heikel, jeder ein Einzelfall mit eigenen Kompetenzen, Empfindungen und eigenem Krankheitsverlauf" (96). ["No two people affected by dementia are alike, and any generalisations are problematic. Those affected by the illness remain essentially unfathomable, each of them a particular case with his or her own abilities or feelings, in whom dementia takes a different course" (94)].<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, a number of recent memoirs seek to provide more nuanced accounts of the impact the disease can have on both the person living with dementia and their closest relatives. While not eschewing the pain, struggle and loss entailed by a family member's cognitive decline, Austrian writer Arno Geiger and Irish writer Ian Maleney strive to document an older man's progress into Alzheimer's disease by foregrounding his unchanged personhood, gendered self, and embodied, relational subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> References from Geiger's and Maleney's texts are incorporated in brackets in the running text. With regard to Geiger, the German original from 2011 is cited first, followed by Stefan Tobler's official translation into English (2017) in square brackets.

Written from the son's and the grandson's point of view respectively, Geiger's *Der alte König in seinem Exil* (2011) [*The Old King in His Exile* (2017)] is set in rural Austria, while Maleney's *Minor Monuments* (2019) is rooted in the rural region of Ireland's Midwest. In view of their respective father's and grandfather's dementia, both authors share the need to preserve in memory and writing "something that cannot be replaced" (Maleney 2019, 95). Their concern is not only for the personal loss of their respective father's and grandfather's individual life stories, but also for a vanishing communal, rural way of life which, as the narratives suggest, facilitates person-centred care. In taking on the role as chronicler, and, to a lesser extent, carer, they also embark on a self-exploratory quest for identity, facilitated by their renewed, changed and intensified relationship with their respective father and grandfather. In both texts Alzheimer's disease is metaphorically linked to experiences of exile and emigration and is explored in the contexts of home and place, shifting family, community and gender constellations, and the authors' own search for identity and belonging in a world unsettled by a paternal figure's cognitive decline. In doing so, their accounts also shed light on constructions of hegemonic masculinity embodying "ideals of physical ability, independence and self-reliance and the dominance of doing rather than being, activity rather than passivity" (Ribeiro et al. 2007, 304) as these ideals collide with older men's realities of living with dementia and relying on care. Both authors find value in caring for their parent or grandparent and in their self-assigned roles as chroniclers of their father's or grandfather's life story in terms of both its individual and cultural significance. In doing so they write against "the cultural mainstream narrative of Alzheimer's disease", which is a narrative "heavily loaded with stigma, as it centres on fears of caregiver burden, dependence, passivity and vulnerability" (Zimmermann 2017, 4). They thus counterbalance the narrative of decline as epitomised by the public image of age-related dementia with much-needed person-centred stories and images that engender emotional connection, identification and empathy rather than fear, alienation and distance.

### **Arno Geiger's *Der alte König in seinem Exil***

Arno Geiger's memoir starts out with a childhood memory of his grandfather, who, when Arno was six years old, stopped recognizing his grandson. It is significant that Geiger notes how he *forgot* this memory until, many years later, his own father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Forgetting is natural, it is human; yet certain forms of forgetting are stigmatised more than others. And, indeed, in Geiger's account of his own father's slowly and at first almost imperceptibly advancing dementia, the disease is presented in terms of a hostile takeover (20).

This image of a patient's defencelessness resulting in inevitable defeat seems incompatible with the son's image of his father's personality and social role: "Jahrelang war mir dieser Gedanke nicht einmal gekommen, das Bild, das ich vom Vater gehabt hatte, war dieser Deutung im Weg gestanden. So absurd es klingt, aber ich hatte es ihm einfach nicht zugetraut." (25) ["For years the thought hadn't even crossed my mind. My childhood image of my father blocked it out. As absurd as it sounds, dementia was the last thing I expected from him" (25)]. His father, August Geiger, seems to share this perception of himself as he initially glosses over his forgetfulness, preferring his family's increasing irritation with him to their sympathy or help. The disease contradicts everything August Geiger stands for, personality traits such as his self-reliance, skilfulness and work ethic as well as his role as a parent, and inevitably reshapes the father-son relationship. And yet, in his account of the continually evolving relationship with his father, Arno Geiger challenges the widespread notion that the illness destroys a person's self, thereby reversing his initial view expressed early on in the book: "Die Persönlichkeit sickert Tropfen für Tropfen aus der Person heraus" (12) ["A person's personality trickles out, drop by drop" (13)]. Instead, he gradually comes to realise that his father's personality remains largely intact, untouched by the disease, even though his memories slip away. As Geiger notes, his father "hatte seine Erinnerungen in Charakter umgemünzt, und der Charakter war ihm geblieben" (73) ["had transformed memories into character, and his character remained" (72)]. Geiger's account thus provides a compelling testimony to "the father's unbroken identity within dementia" (Zimmermann 2017, 63) and subtly redefines the widely accepted notion that we are the sum of our *memories* by suggesting that we are really the sum of our *experiences* – regardless of whether we remember these experiences or not. This realisation is in accord with the view that "a basic subject of experience exists apart from memory, perception, language, intelligence and that this self continues to exist even in the presence of the depredations of dementia" (Oyebode and Oyebode 2017, 113). As Elizabeth Barry explains, "[h]abit and embodied memory can allow for forms of sociality that can, among other things, express attachment and sympathy, produce situational humour, tease, clown, and follow quite complex conversational conventions, even in the absence of autobiographical memory" (2020, 134). The insight that a person's self is embodied and not necessarily tied to his or her autobiographical or narrative memory is also reflected in the book's structure, for, as Zimmermann notes, "Geiger's decision to alternate chapters relating the father's past with those telling of current cognitive difficulties frames his view of the coherence maintained between the father's past personality and in his present illness" (2017, 67). Geiger thus refuses to conflate the patient with his or her illness and

challenges the view that a person living with dementia is merely a shadow of their former self, an empty shell or, as Gleeson puts it, “a grainy facsimile of who [they] used to be” (2019, 222). In doing so, Geiger does not ignore the pain and distress caused by a disease that leaves his father periodically disoriented and upset as he fails to recognise his son, forgets how to eat, believes himself to be a stranger in his own house or feels threatened by and acts out against his well-meaning carers. Early on in his memoir Geiger acknowledges: “Da mein Vater nicht mehr über die Brücke in meine Welt gelangen kann, muss ich hinüber zu ihm” (11). [“As my father can no longer cross the bridge into my world, I have to go over to his” (13)]. This realisation implies an attitude of empathy, imagination and open-mindedness on the son’s part which, in turn, facilitates insight into a condition that seems to epitomise (self-) alienation and decline. Recognising the unchanged personhood of a person living with dementia requires meeting them on their own terms, regardless of society’s norms and expectations, or as Geiger puts it with respect to his father, “innerhalb der Grenzen seiner geistigen Verfassung [wo] er noch immer ein beachtlicher Mensch [ist]” (11) [“within the limits of his own mental state [where] he is still an impressive man” (13)]. Accordingly, as Heike Hartung notes, Geiger “depicts his father’s decade-long suffering from Alzheimer’s disease in an empathetic way that focusses on his fashioning a new relationship with the father rather than concentrating on the losses” (2016, 212). However, despite narrating his father’s life story and journey into Alzheimer’s disease from the point of view of a son and partial caregiver, Geiger avoids appropriating his father’s voice, instead filling the pages in between chapters with short dialogues between father and son, in which his father’s personality and wit shine through without requiring further comment, analysis or interpretation. The father’s self is thus recognised and sustained “in social interactions with others” (Sandberg 2018, 27) and he is at least to some extent afforded the role as co-author of his life narrative (cf. Sandberg 2018, 27). Nonetheless it is the son who takes on the role of chronicler and interpreter of his father’s life and mental condition. His father’s life story is thus inevitably filtered through the son’s perceptions and narrative choices and the images he draws on to illuminate his father’s mental condition seek to bridge the gap between those living with dementia and those not afflicted with the disease.<sup>2</sup> If the zombie metaphor dehumanises the person living with dementia as a mindless and emotionless walking corpse, precluding empathy or even sympathy, the analogy between

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<sup>2</sup> While exile is the central metaphor in the text, Geiger offers other ways to facilitate an imaginative and empathetic understanding of the disease by comparing the condition to temporary states such as the moment between sleeping and waking or the immersion in absurd fictional worlds such as those created by Franz Kafka.

dementia and exile has the opposite effect. The human need for a home is a universal experience that most people will share and be able to relate to. For August Geiger this need is particularly poignant as his formative experience is his trauma of war captivity as a young man. According to his son, this traumatic experience determined his father's life choices and priorities based on his central concerns: "Zuhause, Sicherheit, Geborgenheit" (82) ["home, safety, security" (81)]. The family home that he started to build in the 1950s and that he continued to expand and improve throughout his life bears testimony to this deeply rooted need. According to Geiger, his father decided to get married to his mother primarily to provide her with a home. The house as his life-long project also testifies to the father's self-taught and idiosyncratic skills as architect and carpenter, which in turn signify his masculine self-image as his family's protector.<sup>3</sup> The book's title describes the father as an exiled king, thus suggesting that his – in this case – benevolent rule has been forcefully ended, that he has been deprived of his power to protect his family and himself behind the walls of his 'castle'.

Recent studies emphasise the importance of acknowledging the unchanged gender identity of people living with dementia (cf. Ribeiro et al. 2007, Boyle 2017, Tolhurst and Weicht 2017, Sandberg 2018). While Geiger repeatedly emphasises his father's lack of paternal authority – "Trotz des Altersunterschieds spielte sich der Vater nie als Herr- und Haushaltsvorstand auf" (84) ["In spite of the difference in my parents' ages, my father made no pretence about being the head of the family" (84)] – as well as his lack of ambition to assert his masculinity (78), he also points out how August Geiger remained faithful to the values of the tight-knit rural community in which he grew up and where he spent all his life, favouring stability and security over opportunity and happiness (77). As Geiger notes, "Er war fest davon überzeugt, dass es Männer- und Frauenarbeit gibt" (84) ["He firmly believed that there was man's work and woman's work" (84)], and he was content to be stuck in "den alten Gewohnheiten seines dörflichen Daseins" (87) ["the old habits of his village life" (86)]. This includes the father's firm refusal to take his family on holidays or even to accompany his newly-wed wife on a walk in the woods in lieu of a honeymoon (82). Geiger provides psychological explanations for his father's refusal to travel by referring to the trauma of his war captivity, yet his father's lack of consideration for his wife's and children's wishes is clearly in line with the characteristics typically attributed to traditional notions of masculinity according to which a father provides a home and income for the family rather than emotional care. The reader learns that, in line with

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<sup>3</sup> Geiger describes how his father repeatedly goes in search for his four young children he fears have disappeared from their beds or asks whether he will be able to take his family with him when he goes 'home'.

ideas of masculine self-reliance and toughness, it wasn't in August Geiger's emotionally withdrawn character to open up to his family about his fears caused by the first signs of dementia (21). This also indicates a masculine personal strategy of stoical "acceptance of circumstances" (Tollhurst and Weicht, 2017, 31). Even in the later stages of his disease, August Geiger is presented as being preoccupied with expectations around performance, self-reliance and productivity, all of which would be associated with hegemonic masculinity. In conversations with his son he repeatedly comments on his sense of failure in old age and his resigned, apologetic exasperation about his lack of strength and performance is a recurrent theme throughout the text: "Weißt du, bei mir ist nichts mehr los, ich bin schwach, ich bin leistungsschwach, das hat sich so ergeben. [...] Ich bin leider einer, der nicht mehr tüchtig ist.' Dann setzte er sich zu mir an den Tisch und legte den Kopf auf die am Tisch verschränkten Hände" (116-117). ["'You know, nothing's going on with me. I'm weak, I achieve little. [...] Unfortunately, I'm no good at anything any more'. Then he sat down at the table and lowered his head unto his folded arms" (111)]. And yet, the father's recurrent concern with and emphasis of his past strength and achievements also serve "as an assertion that he has met the moral standard of economic distribution to wider society over his lifespan" (Tollhurst and Weicht 2017, 33). This assertion of a sense of masculine continuity between his former and present self is illustrated best in the playful activity of arm-wrestling in which August Geiger puts all his strength to show his son that while he may not be as strong as he used to be, he is not a "Pappenstiel" (136) ["peanuts" (129)] either.

Nevertheless, Geiger describes how his father, fully aware of his need for assistance and care, welcomes the help offered by his – typically female and Eastern European - carers and has a good rapport with some of them, a compliance which might again indicate a "reorientation of masculine qualities" in the form of "stoical" acceptance (Tollhurst and Weicht 2017, 34). However, the relationship between the father and his carers seems to work best whenever he is entrusted with a sense of responsibility and agency. Thus, he acts out violently against carers who treat him like a child or try to enforce his cooperation (132; 125-26). In contrast, his favourite carer Daniela successfully discourages him from leaving the house to 'go home' by arguing that she needs his company (119). As Geiger notes, Daniela also makes a point of thanking him, even when she is the one doing him a favour, "das baue ihn auf, dann sei er zufrieden" (120) ["It built him up, left him contented" (115)]. She gives him tasks such as teaching her German grammar or carrying the shopping, a strategy which contributes to the father's sense of well-being. As Trevitt notes and as Geiger's account of successful ways to communicate with his father illustrates, "there needs to be an emphasis on understanding the

world of the person with dementia; on communication that can tap into the ‘inner core of being’ of the person with dementia; and, thoughtful strategies to manage the most disturbing behavioural challenges in a setting that is caring, secure and meaningful” (Trevitt 2006, 109). This is only possible in a familiar surrounding, where the person living with dementia is known and his or her personality understood, as is also the case in the care home where August Geiger resides when caring for him at home is no longer possible: “Dort [im dörflichen Seniorenheim] kennt man den Vater, und nicht erst, seit er krank ist. Dort sieht man in ihm die ganze Person, jemanden mit einem langen Leben, mit einer Kindheit und Jugend, jemanden, der den Namen August Geiger vor mehr als achtzig Jahren bekommen hat und nicht erst mit Beginn der Krankheit” (133-130). [“The village’s home for the elderly is staffed by trained professionals, working in good conditions. [...] And they had known our father before he became ill. In the home, they see him as a whole person, someone with a long life, including a childhood and youth, someone who has been August Geiger for more than eighty years and not just since his illness” (127)].

It is presented as a particularly cruel twist of fate that August Geiger, who spent his entire life creating a secure home for himself and his family, comes to experience feelings of exile and homesickness even within the objective safety of his own home. Yet Geiger comes to realise that his father’s perpetual feeling of exile is a symptom of the disease that cannot be assuaged by familiar surroundings or reassurances that the place his father does not recognise is still his home (12; 15). Instead, it is “[die tiefe] Heimatlosigkeit eines Menschen, dem die ganze Welt fremd geworden war” (55) [“the utter homelessness of a person for whom the whole world has become foreign” (55)] that prevents him from feeling safe and at home. By making exile the central metaphor of his narrative, Geiger finds a way to make sense of the disease both in the context of his father’s personal life story but also in a broader cultural context, viewing the disease as symbolic of people’s disorientation in a globalised world that many find increasingly difficult to grasp and navigate. Viewing his father’s condition through the lens of this shared human desire for a sense of home and belonging on the one hand and the modern condition of living in a disorienting, globalised world on the other facilitates empathy and understanding (58, 57). He also understands that there are ways to provide his father at least temporarily with a sense of home and security regardless of his physical surroundings, for instance by singing familiar folk songs with him, thus creating “ein Zuhause außerhalb der greifbaren Welt” (14) [“a home outside the tangible world” (15)].

In the course of the memoir, the father’s memory loss is attributed with facilitating a caring, emotional and uncomplicated connection between father and son, unburdened by former



conflicts (72). The father's vulnerability thus facilitates the emergence of a "[r]elationship of care [...] which is free from the idea of a performance-orientated, dominant or competitive masculinity" (Tholen 2018, 401). August Geiger may not remember that Arno is his son but he reminisces about the importance of his family and his children in particular when he, for instance, refers to the happiest time of his life as the days when his children were young (cf. 75). It appears to be the first time that the father expresses his paternal love for his children in such an open way, a fact in no way diminished by his failure to recognise his adult son. Geiger, too, finds ways to open up to his father, for instance in a poignant scene in which he takes his father's hand and tells him he loves him (184; 177). While the former father-son relationship is described as having been conflict-laden, casual and superficial (99; 97), this relationship is being gradually redefined by the father's advancing illness. As Geiger repeatedly notes, he starts feeling closer to his father and to genuinely enjoy his company. He finds ways to have deeper conversations that do not rely on shared memories but on what Trevitt calls "spiritual reminiscence" which "asks questions about meaning in life, joy, sadness, grief and regrets" (2006, 125). This re-acquaintance between father and son also brings to light formerly unsuspected commonalities, for instance when the writer-son marvels at his father's knack for creative and witty wordplay (99).

The importance of Arno Geiger's memoir in counterbalancing narratives of decline, othering, and loss of self cannot be underestimated. There is value, his account reminds us, in even this most cruel of experiences, there is the possibility to experience moments of closeness, content, and happiness, and there is a chance to heal strained, broken or estranged relationships. Despite the changed relationship, in which the son takes on the role as partial carer of his father, he acknowledges and presents his father as a complex and multi-layered human being: "Wenn ich mich frage, was der Vater für ein Mensch ist, passt er manchmal ganz leicht in ein Schema. Dann wieder zerbricht er in die vielen Gestalten, die er im Laufe seines Lebens anderen und mir gegenüber eingenommen hat" (185) ["When I ask myself what my father is like, at first he fits easily into a type. Then he once again splinters into the many shapes that he took on over the course of his life for myself and others" (178)]. His father, then, is valued and acknowledged as a "self that expands into other lives" (Barry 2020, 132), regardless of his inability to remember and narrate the previous and multiple manifestations of this self.

### **Ian Maleney, *Minor Monuments***

Ian Maleney's essay collection *Minor Monuments* shows many parallels to Geiger's memoir. Maleney's focus is on his grandfather, John Joe, and, as the grandson who only occasionally visits his family, Maleney is even less actively involved in his grandfather's care than Geiger is in his father's.<sup>4</sup> Yet both narratives resort to similar images, most crucially the metaphor of exile, to explore and make sense of a condition that uproots their own and their families' lives. Both focus on their family member's advancing disease in the context of a tightly-knit but vanishing rural community and, in doing so, both embark on a self-exploratory quest for identity, which leads them back, and allows them to reconnect, with the rural home they left behind.

Not unlike Geiger, Maleney struggles with the role reversal implied by the fact that his disoriented grandfather is now in need of his grandson's care and guidance. Witnessing the effect of his grandfather's beginning dementia for the first time, Maleney recalls: "John Joe had been, until this point, an authority figure in my life. In some ways, he was *the* authority figure: John Joe could tell even my father to do something and expect it to be done. Seeing him like this – confused, out of place, violent – I no longer had a clear idea where I stood with him. The positions we had always assumed were now reversed" (55). Yet in some ways the disease also brings Maleney closer to his grandfather as he has to relearn the relationship. Like Geiger, Maleney comes to understand that he has to meet his grandfather on the terms dictated by the disease, following him on "whatever winding paths he was gravelling in his mind that afternoon" (56) in order to create a sense of familiarity, security and home even in an anonymous hospital setting: "It was my job to recognise him for who he was, and to give him the tools with which to recognise himself in that alien environment. The nurses, for all their strength and kindness, could not make him feel at home. [...] He needed a mirror, someone to say: here you are, I see you" (62-63). John Joe's masculine identity is closely linked to his work as a farmer and it is the conversation about everyday work on the farm, such as bringing in the turf from the bog, that helps him calm down after undergoing surgery and waking up to an unfamiliar hospital setting. In a later scene in which Maleney keeps his increasingly demented grandfather company in his grandparents' kitchen, his grandfather assumes that Maleney works for Bord Na Móna, a turf-processing company, like he did years ago. Maleney describes this misunderstanding as a "life-saver" (97) as, for a while, his grandfather's interest is kindled, memories are sparked and a lively conversation ensues: "We could talk as adults about work,

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<sup>4</sup> Both authors acknowledge that the actual care work is done by almost exclusively female family members and paid carers.

and this felt like a miracle” (99). As Tollhurst and Weicht note, “[r]ecalling former endeavours can enable men to assert their former contributions, even when the dementia has limited their current levels of activity” (2017, 33). In fact, John Joe’s significant decline in health is captured in a scene that signals a complete loss of interest in his lifetime’s work when some cattle break out and John Joe, rather than taking charge of the situation, stands at the front door of his house, “like an oblivious child at a funeral, singing his playful, happy songs like he didn’t have a care in the world” (133). This description reveals how the disease has shattered the grandson’s image of his grandfather, how, in his perception, the authority figure in his life has been reduced to the image of a carefree child.

Maleney lives a life in Dublin that couldn’t be more remote from his grandparents’ and parents’ everyday life on the farm in their Midlands community. It is through engaging with his grandfather’s condition that he is brought back in touch with the rural way of life, if only by writing about it and visiting his family home more often. As he notes, “I somehow became caught up in my grandfather the way one gets caught in rain. The rural, family life which had seemed before to be a restriction and a limitation became, to my surprise, an opportunity, and then an obsession” (63-64). As in Geiger’s memoir, the grandparents’ house assumes a central role both in the text and in Maleney’s imagination. While his grandfather’s disease has upset the securities and certainties of childhood, the house itself becomes a bulwark, “the strongest shelter I have experienced against time’s many corrosions” (41). Unlike August Geiger, John Joe did not build the house but inherited it from his own father, but the fact that he shaped the place with “his hands” (231), “lived his whole life in his father’s house and never even left the country” (69) provides an important parallel in both life stories. August Geiger and John Joe also share the formative experience of exile, although John Joe’s life has been impacted by his siblings’ emigration rather than his own. A central memory explored in the text, and one that John Joe retells and treasures as his other memories are fading, is how his sister Chrissy emigrated to America at the age of fourteen. His memory of bidding her farewell turns into the central and most poignant moment of his life. As Maleney explains, if the memory came to his mind, “he would sometimes be moved to tears” (74). Even though it turns out that Aunt Chrissy’s memory of the event and its significance fundamentally differs from and contradicts John Joe’s version, the emotional salience of this memory of emigration takes on symbolic meaning in the grandfather’s own struggle against a dementia-induced sense of exile and loss. Regardless of the fact that his memory of the event turns out to be “mostly fiction”, it becomes the memory encapsulating “a life’s worth of regret, love, and shame”, and a memory that stays with him “when most other memories had vacated his mind” (77).

The theme of exile is further explored when Maleney describes how John Joe, as his disease advances, clings to folk songs many of which are about the Irish emigrant experience and most of which he still remembers and sings along to. Just like Geiger, Maleney suggests that the emigrant experience is an apt metaphor for Alzheimer's disease:

As the past grew more distant and foggy in his mind [...] the songs became more important and accurate too. They were a link with that past, that foreign country, even as they dramatised the experience of losing it. John Joe sang like a man whose boat was filling rapidly with water. He had a very wide ocean to cross, one he could not swim over. (128-129)

As in Geiger's memoir, the image of exile and emigration, deeply ingrained in the Irish collective consciousness, serves to create a sense of empathy and identification. The songs are also tied to a lifetime of nights in "the dark and smoke-filled backrooms of local pubs" (128), where community life takes place in the Irish countryside, and while these memories may no longer be verbally accessible to John Joe, the songs still help to anchor him in this familiar social context when, at the end of a song, he asks his grandson "with as much heart as he could muster, *Get that man another pint!*" (128). While his identity as a farmer seems to vanish, John Joe's "anchor", until the end of his life, is his wife Kathleen, on whom he relies completely: "He needed her to be there, and without her he was lost" (79). The grandfather's gendered identity is thus tied to his identity as a husband. Even towards the end of his life when "he had forgotten almost everything", he still remembers "scraps of melody" alongside his wife's name, "hidden in that part of the brain where treasures are kept" (24). These treasures signify his embodied self that persists even in the absence of a narrative memory and that surfaces on certain rare occasions treasured by the family. For instance, a comical remark made by John Joe leaves the whole family "bent double, crying laughing" (209) in recognition of this glimpse of the grandfather's personality, having reemerged "from the very depths of his soul" (209). Another poignant instance is the last photograph Maleney takes of John Joe, the last one in which he looks "himself" and which shows "the accumulation of life that coheres in the image of the body, the way the past is written into his presence there" (197). Like Geiger, then, Maleney comes to understand the continuity of his grandfather's embodied self even in the more advanced stages of his disease.

Not unlike Geiger's account of his father's dementia, Maleney's essay collection narrates his own quest for identity as deeply intertwined with the exploration of his grandfather's disease. This connection is captured by his realisation of the "uncanny" similarity between John Joe and

himself when in the hospital he notices that his grandfather's naked legs, "almost the legs of a child" (50), look like his own: "Sometimes I find myself just sitting there, staring at my own feet and thinking of his" (50). His quest to record his grandfather's life, "to listen hard to his final emergence; to capture his life in the last stage of its becoming – to record that person still forming even as he began, contrapuntally, to unravel" (64), is torn between frustration when his "hopes of retrieving meaning and significance from the situation were thwarted" (134) and the growing realisation of an "ethical demand" to recognise the person with dementia, to both see and hear them: "As the usual bonds of recognition and connection are broken – as memories fall away, as activities become impossible, as conversation is reduced to silence – there remains the burden and duty of saying: *I see you*" (214). As Fiona Murphy puts it in a review of the book, "In the final essay, Maleney suggests community and co-dependency should be valued and cherished. He concludes that to care for someone requires listening—deep, attentive listening—like the red light of a recorder switching on, even when there are gaps and spaces and voids" (2019). This realisation implies that, while a person with advanced dementia may be considered "a person who has no value at all" (177) in a world focused on usefulness and productivity, this person is still very much of value in terms of their relational and intersubjective identity. John Joe remains a valued part of both his family and larger community and he lives on in the communal memory even after his physical death. Thus, on the night of his grandfather's wake, Maleney sees "the depth of his life reflected in the people who came through the house that evening, the incremental patterning of eighty-three years spent in one place growing richer with every arrival" (228). For Maleney, this realisation is bitter-sweet as he views himself as no longer being an integral part of this vanishing community and as not having achieved what his grandfather did during his lifetime: to create a home, a place within a community that recognises and sees a person even if this person can no longer recognise themselves.

## **Conclusion**

In both Geiger's and Maleney's memoirs, the journey of documenting the progress of Alzheimer's disease and preserving the rapidly vanishing memories of the person living with dementia yields various insights into the grandfather/grandson and father/son relationship as well as into the complexities of personhood. Both Geiger and Maleney acknowledge and unflinchingly explore the cruelty of the disease and its effect on both the person living with dementia and their carers. At the same time the authors insist on the unchanging personhood of

the dementia patient despite and beyond the disease. Even though the men's gendered social roles change due to their dementia diagnosis, as they become dependent on care and largely restricted to a domestic setting, it is obvious that their masculine identity remains an important part of their selves, their assertions of their embodied masculine identity confounding social expectations and repositioning. However, by taking on the role of partial carer and refashioning the relationship to their father or grandfather beyond their role of a paternal authority figure, both Geiger and Maleney gain insight into the self as intersubjective and relational, concepts that would traditionally be aligned with feminine characteristics as well as with life in a close-knit rural community. By focusing on the person and their life story both authors avoid reducing their beloved family member to a disease, focusing instead on their personhood as being grounded in their embodied, intersubjective, and relational self. In doing so, they also stress the need for person-centred care, as provided in both the Austrian and Irish rural community settings. Moreover, they draw on the metaphor of exile and emigration to facilitate a better understanding of the condition and to create empathy and identification. Both narratives suggest that even in the final stages of the disease the father or grandfather living with dementia can still teach his children and grandchildren valuable lessons about old age and dementia (Geiger 136, 130). In this sense the person living with dementia turns into a mirror to the son's and grandson's own potential future self. It is ultimately the exposure to the realities of ageing and disease, too often hidden away in anonymous institutions, that can facilitate a person-centred approach both in private and public care settings. Moreover, by intertwining their own search for identity with their father's and grandfather's biographies, both Geiger and Maleney invite their readers "to recognise shared, human vulnerability as well as to attend to the socially situated nature of vulnerability in relationships of care and dependence" (Falcus and Sako, 28-29). In doing so, they provide much-needed counternarratives to popular representations of dementia as narratives of othering and decline.

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