Title: Exploring Care through Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van*: Extending Meanings, Encountering Otherness

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EXPLORING CARE THROUGH ALAN BENNETT'S *THE LADY IN THE VAN:* EXTENDING MEANINGS, ENCOUNTERING OTHERNESS

This article explores care relationships as they are represented within "The Lady in the Van," a sequence of interconnected texts by English writer Alan Bennett. By mainly taking the memoirs and film of the same title as primary sources, and in the light of key concepts related to care theory and aging studies, the article shows the extent to which Bennett goes beyond the accustomed portrayal of domestic relationships of care by placing himself as the protagonist of a narrative -and a relationship- in which caring for and about a complete stranger entails coming to terms with both social and personal issues. In this sense, the article also examines the ways in which the relationship of care portrayed by Bennett entails exploring forms of Otherness that both caring and aging unveil, which are related to age, gender and sexuality, and that in Bennett's narrative end up favouring a dialogue of which the author himself is the main beneficiary.

Keywords

care, aging, English literature, contemporary film, Alan Bennett

Introduction

Within the mostly individualistic, market-driven, neo-liberal societies of the Western world, debates around care create a counter-model of ethics and also a political discourse that affects both private and public spheres. As a matter of fact, as Virginia Held (2006) maintains, the understanding of care as an ethical model involves elaborating "values as fundamental and as relevant to political institutions and to how society is organized, as those of justice" (p. 18). The intricacies of relationships of care and the complexities of the moral implications that they entail have often been explored in novels and films, attaining in both cases deeply vivid portrayals; however, all too often these representations focus on care within the private domain, and mostly in the context of parent-child or conjugal relationships. Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van* stands out as an exceptional text, or rather, as a palimpsest of texts of the same title: in it, the British writer develops a narrative of care that blends the private and the public and, in this way, attains a complex depiction of his characters' relational and interdependent identities.

At the core of this multi-textual narrative, composed of the author's memoirs (initially published in 1989), a stage play (1990), a radio play (2009), and a film (Hytner, 2015), is his own personal experience with Miss Shepherd, and older woman who lived in a van. Miss Shepherd parked her van in the writer's driveway, in front of his house in Camden Town, in 1974, and she stayed there for fifteen years. Bennett's initial memoir is nowadays available in two different editions published in 2015, with a preface and film diary written by Bennett himself in one of them (henceforth referred to as 2015a) and with an introduction also written by the author in the other (which will be referenced as 2015b from now on). Bennett's re-writing, through different genres, of what he himself has considered, not without irony, his own Proustian motif (Bennett, 2015a, p. 49), is as intriguing as the kind of relationship on which all the texts focus. Interestingly enough, Bennett persistently refuses to define his relationship with Miss Shepherd as one of care, despite neighbours, social workers, friends and acquaintances insisted on recognizing him as the lady's carer.

It is precisely due to the exceptional circumstances in which the relationship between Bennett and Miss Shepherd do create and sustain a relationship of care for fifteen years that "The Lady in the Van" invites analysis. In the light of care theory (Glenn, 2000; Held, 2006; Kunow 2015) and also by drawing from key concepts in aging studies (Gullette, 2004; Woodward, 2006; DeFalco, 2010), this article examines issues of individual and social responsibility as represented in Bennett's multi-textual narrative. At the same time, this study observes the effect that the interplay among distinctive markers of identity —namely, age,

gender, sexuality and class— have on the protagonists' identities in parallel to their interaction. Ultimately, Bennett's story of care (or sequence of stories) leads to a dialogue between different forms of Otherness, of which the author is a particular beneficiary despite his refusal to acknowledge his role as carer. As has been argued by cultural and critical gerontologists such as Hepworth (2000), Zeilig (2011) and Marshall (2015), among others, a humanities approach in issues as complex as care offers invaluable insights into the lived experience of the persons implied in the care relationship. Bennett's *The Lady in the Van* is a particularly enlightening case: in this multi-layered narrative, Bennett filters his own experience within a 'care relationship' through his art and public persona as a recognised writer, and eventually comes up with a story with which any person can feel identified. Significantly enough, this process of identification is channelled precisely through the peculiar characteristics of Bennett's relationship with Mrs Shepherd. Thus, the highly particular dialogue that Bennett establishes with the complex issue of care and the different forms of Otherness that emerge in it, is made available as a tool of reflection for the general audience. Viewers and readers of the intertwined texts in *Lady in the Van* may well include practitioners who, through the ironic touch of Bennett's art, can approach his care narrative as an informative example for their day-to-day practice.

Care as a Relationship

In an article published in *Age, Culture and Humanities*, Professor Rüdiger Kunow (2015) recognizes the "highly unstable" meaning of the term care. However, he argues that it "always recognizes a relationship that is at once dialogical *and* asymmetrical" insofar as there is a person who "gives care" while another one "receives care, and oftentimes depends on it emotionally, materially, or symbolically" (p. 319). The extraordinary relationship of care that Bennett narrates in his memoirs and that is also transposed into the resulting fictional texts, does reflect a sense of asymmetry (or more than one), and only gradually, becomes somehow dialogical. Interestingly enough, it is the cared for that is somehow the agent of the asymmetrical relationship, and the one in less need of a dialogue, inasmuch as Miss Shepherd looks more autonomous than Mr Bennett, at least at emotional and symbolic levels. Taking the memoir, film, and short story as primary sources, we will first consider how this inverted asymmetry is developed in Bennett's narrative, and will then look at its eventual dialogical development.

Through a predominantly relational perspective, Kunow regards care as: a socially mandated and culturally constructed relationship that imbricates both care-giver and care-

recipient in a set of relationships: private as well as public, economic as well as social and cultural, crossing over – and moving beyond – lines between self and other, the strong and the weak, lines of generation, social status, and also, increasingly often, those of the nation state (our emphasis, 2015, p. 330).Excepting nationhood, these are precisely the terms that first distinguish the protagonists of Bennett's story. Through their peculiar relationship over the course of fifteen years, the lines that separate the identities of the two protagonists become questioned and are even re-defined. Nonetheless, the first line to be crossed through their relationship is mainly that of social status, especially if the specific context of the Gloucester Crescent community is taken into account. In a comparative study that explores the psychoanalytic imagery of Hytner's film in relation to Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho, David Brennan (2017) states that Bennett's narrative "forces an encounter between the homeless and the middle class" (p. 7). Indeed, as reflected in the memoir, short story and film, Alan Bennett presents himself as a man in his thirties who has already acquired a privileged status as a recognized writer, and who has moved to the London neighbourhood of Gloucester Crescent. As Bennett explains in the introduction to his short story, he describes the area as made up of "[y]oung professional couples, many of them in journalism or television" who bought up the "large semi-detached villas […] originally built to house the Victorian middle class" and "converted them" (2015a, p. 5-7). As a playwright and actor, he especially valued the neighbourhood as "unsmart, relatively quiet, and handy for Regent's Park and the West End" or the BBC in Portland Place, to which he could easily cycle down (p. 13). As a single man, he found the small house suitable to his needs, unlike "the young couples with children who were beginning to colonise this part of North London" (p. 11). Only five years later, his peaceful life changes quite abruptly when he becomes acquainted with Miss Mary Shepherd, a woman in her early sixties who lives in a van in Crescent Street, close to Bennett's new house and who, as one of Bennett's eventual lovers in the film version puts it, "is a bit of a character" (Hytner, 2015). Far from representing a stereotypical older woman, as either fragile or vulnerable, Miss Bennett makes her presence clearly visible through her yellow van, which she repaints and decorates with emblems of the Union Jack; through her strong-willed and even rude attitude towards the neighbours, to whom she never shows any kind of gratitude or sign of kindness; and through her openly conservative and also very personal right-wing ideology, which she disseminates through leaflets and also chalked messages on the pavement as if she were a political activist, and make her regard Bennett himself as "a communist" (Hytner, 2015).

Despite the many differences that set Bennett and Miss Shepherd apart from an ideological and socioeconomic perspective, Bennett recognizes in his short story that – "[t]here was a gap between our social position and our social *obligations*. It was in this gap that Miss Shepherd (in her van) was able to live" (our emphasis, 2015a, p. 6). As implied by this reflection, the different notions of social responsibility that both characters have are highly conditioned by their different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and, in Miss Shepherd's case, by the effects of a traumatic accident on her mental health, which aggravates her declassed condition. The lack of connection between Bennett and Miss Shepherd in social and cultural terms, and Miss Shepherd's own delusional view of her reality, which is enhanced by the fantasies she has about meeting political celebrities and historical personalities —"She inhabited a different world from ordinary humanity, a world in which the Virgin Mary would be encountered outside the Post Office in Parkway and Mr Krushchev higher up the street …" (Bennett, 2015a, p. 45) — enable them not only "to cross over social lines between self and other" (Kunow, 2015, p.319) and gradually enter in an exceptional relationship of care, but also to engage in such a relationship without manifesting a sense of duty (on the carer's side) or of dependence (on that of the cared after), at least in explicit ways.

In this respect, it could be said that the relationship between Miss Shepherd and Bennett is developed *because of* and *in spite of* their different social and moral positions, and it can be firstly defined in negative terms, namely, based on what care, in this case, is *not* about. On the one hand, in his memoir, short story and in the film, Bennett insists on resisting the association between care, charity and altruistic generosity in order to account for his decision to allow Miss Shepherd's van into his drive. As he contends in the short story, "I wanted a quiet life as much as, and possibly more than, she did. In the garden she was at least out of harm's way" (2015a, p. 10-11). In the memoir, this is expressed similarly when he says: "I was looking after myself, Miss Shepherd only incidentally; kindness didn't really come into it" (2015b, p. 18). On the other hand, the writer refers to his relationship with Miss Shepherd as devoid of any feeling for her or sense of obligation: as he affirms in his memoir, in his case "feeling scarcely entered into it and this may well not be uncommon. Caring, as often as not, is coping with, being landed with, being stuck with, having no choice about" (2015b, p. 23). Despite the moral, emotional and social gap in which Miss Shepherd, from Bennett's viewpoint, is simply allowed to live, the neighbours regard the case from a completely different perspective. Even though they are not unkind to the older woman (in fact, the film shows some of them trying to cater for her material needs every now and then),

they mostly tolerate her presence in the neighbourhood, probably moved by the emotion of "guilt" (Hytner, 2015), as the voiceover puts it in the film. Consequently, they regard Bennett's gesture to host Miss Shepherd's van as not only "kind" (Hytner, 2015), but as leading to a proper relationship of care that is to take place inside Bennett's property. In a way, the sequence which in the film shows the neighbours having a meeting in Bennett's home to discuss Miss Shepherd's situation, renders Bennett the person in charge of the older woman. At the same time, by accepting his social responsibility, Bennett also transforms the tolerant neighbours into a caring community.

On her part, Miss Shepherd never shows any kindness or gratitude neither towards Bennett nor towards the community, despite the not very frequent but various efforts they make to be kind to her, as reflected in the film. In the film, Bennet describes Miss Shepherd as "never easy to help." Actually, the writer explains "she would come into the garden, yes, but only as a favour to me" (Hytner, 2015). From the first time she turns up in Crescent Street driving her van, she presents herself as an independent and permanently busy woman who, despite her prolonged stay in the neighbourhood, appears to be constantly on the move. Neither her condition as a vagrant nor her old age prevent her from looking determined, self-assured, and even aggressive at times. In fact, with the exception of the sequences in which an ex-policeman surreptitiously wanders about her van in order to bribe her, and two young hooligans shake her van at night —both of which enhance Bennett's role as her protector— she only presents her situation and appearance as a source of fragility whenever there are benefits to be gained. Hence, in the film she uses the expression "I'm a sick woman" (Hytner, 2015) to get the children rehearsing their instruments near her van to stop, to park her van in front of Bennett's house in an occasion in which she needed water, or to win the sympathy of a seller at the market to whom she repeats the same definition, hence performing both her age and disability by adding she is "in dire need of assistance" and maybe "dying, possibly" (Hytner, 2015). Also, she uses the word "disabled" to refer to herself when she gets a removal order for parking restrictions or when Bennett suggests she should move somewhere else. On the other hand, Miss Shepherd resists any ageist attempt to diminish her as an older woman living on the street. This is clearly shown when she shouts "Don't sweetheart me!" (Hytner, 2015) to a young patronizing seller at the market.

Through her paradoxical resort to old age as both a cause of disability, illness or frailty at times, and a source of empowered authority when needed, Miss Shepherd clearly generates an ambivalent performance of age that destabilizes and even subverts the alleged asymmetry in the care relationship that is established between her and Mr Bennett. This ambivalent

performance is based, on the one hand, on the accumulated conventions of old age that associate agedness with poverty and frailty, and which Miss Shepherd, in line with her social circumstances, plays with at will. On the other hand, the materiality of Miss Shepherd's (and Maggie Smith's own) aged body, or her/their "default body," as Gullette (2004, p. 160) would put it, is fused with their very performance. As Kathleen Woodward notes, "[t]he effect of the very materiality of the body in age can be that at a certain point it performs us, reducing the latitude promised in part by the very concept of performance" (2006, p. 180). In any case, there are few occasions in which Miss Shepherd's aging body simply performs itself. Rather, in the various versions of the story, she uses her agedness as a mask she can put on and off conveniently, and mostly appears to have more energy and willpower than her younger carer. This contrast is clearly reflected in the film version through Maggie Smith and Alex Jennings' own performance styles: in his role as Mr Bennett, Jenning's nuanced self-containment perfectly conveys the author's constantly observant and perplexed attitude; while Smith's highly energetic and multi-faceted performance as Miss Shepherd masterfully navigates within the rich spectrum of tragicomedy required by the character, and resorts to her own physical agedness as an appearance she can enhance or undermine at her character's convenience. In her monograph on Maggie Smith, Caroline Fevrier (2018) defines the Miss Shepherd performed by the famous actress as —

> an odious but nevertheless lovable character, as her lack of consideration and her bad faith rapidly get irresistible. Always convinced that she is right, with a frenetic diction which indicates a perturbed mind, Miss Shepherd delights us with her steadfast determination (p. 126).

All things considered, the relationship between Miss Shepherd and Mr Bennett cannot be understood as one of care *stricto sensu:* it was never planned or perceived as such by any of them, nor was it ever based on family or contractual bonds. Rather, it emerged from Bennett's need to have peace of mind in relation to Miss Bennett (both at a practical level – so that he could concentrate on his work; and probably at an ethical level – as part of his social responsibility, yet resisting moral readings of goodness or altruism). Yet, some of its essential components do coincide with standard definitions of care, or at least with some of its fundamental aspects. According to Glenn (2000), for example, ""[c]aring about" engages both thought and feeling, including awareness and attentiveness, concern about and feelings of responsibility of meeting another's needs. "Caring for" refers to the varied activities of providing for the needs or well-being of another person. These activities include physical care (e.g., bathing, feeding), emotional care (e.g., reassuring, sympathetic listening), and direct

services (e.g., driving a person to the doctor, running errands)" (p. 87). Whilst it is the social services that technically care for Miss Shepherd, it is Bennett who, albeit unwillingly, makes sure that Miss Shepherd receives emotional support and ensures her basic needs are covered. By allowing her to live in his driveway, he not only provides her with a safer home, but also converts her into a permanent -and therefore, more dignified- member of the Crescent community. Miss Shepherd soon recognizes the difference in respectability that this entails, as shown when, after being insulted by a passer-by, she replies "I am not a beggar! I am his [Bennett's] neighbour!" (Hytner, 2015).

Care as the Encounter with the Other

Having considered the peculiar asymmetry in Bennett and Miss Shepherd's relationship, we return to Kunow's definition of care in order to look at its dialogical dimension. Even though, as reflected in the short story and film, the actual dialogue between the two characters may seem scarce and does not apparently lead to significant changes in the protagonist, their exchanges over the years and their most frequently silent acknowledgment of each other's presence clearly have an impact on Bennett's side, inasmuch as the entire experience of 'caring-yet-not-wanting-to-care-for' Miss Shepherd is meticulously registered in the writer's diary, and filtered through the different textual formats which are derived from it. Ultimately, Bennett's relationship with Miss Shepherd generates a series of reflections on the author, which are especially elicited by Miss Shepherd's unique personality and identity traits. Many of the older woman's identity features can also be identified in negative terms, namely, as signifying that which Mr Bennett 'is not.' From this perspective, their relationship of care can also be defined as an encounter with the Other, one in which Miss Shepherd, as the cared after, personifies Otherness at first sight, but which also entails foregrounding the Other(s) within Bennett himself. At this point it is useful to resort to Amelia DeFalco's (2010) extended interpretation of "the uncanny" (p. 17), which takes the famous Freudian essay as a starting point in order to refer to the experience of aging, especially when applied to aging into old age. According to DeFalco:

> aging produces an instability that constantly evades identification; it defies categorization and casts doubt on the dualism of self and other. Instead, there is simultaneity, familiarity and strangeness. (…) [T]he uncanniness of old age is far more than a shocking confrontation with an unfamiliar reflection; aging, particularly aging into old age, opens our eyes to the ubiquity of uncanniness, and most unsettlingly, to the contradiction that is constitutive of selfhood (DeFalco, 2010, p. 17).

In *The Lady in the Van*, the uncanniness of old age that is most obviously represented by Miss Shepherd renders Bennett's different forms of Otherness more salient. In particular, Bennett's own uncanniness becomes "ubiquitous" (p. 17), as predicted by DeFalco, insofar as he becomes Miss Shepherd's male carer, while at the same time standing out in the community as a middle-aged, homosexual bachelor.

In terms of gender, neither Bennett nor Miss Shepherd fall within stereotypical depictions of aging and care in media representation; far from it, Bennett, a single man living on his own, subverts prevailing manifestations of gendered care (Glenn, 2000, p. 84), not only by taking responsibility over Miss Shepherd, but also by reflecting on his own responsibility towards his own mother at a moment when she is showing signs of dementia. As for the characters' contrasted sexual identities, Miss Shepherd is depicted as a somehow asexual being through the film's flashback sequences in which her past as a nun is evoked. However, she remains part of the heteronormative culture that makes Bennet an outsider. This is clearly reflected in her suspicious dismissiveness towards Bennett's male lovers, whom she actually refers to, quite humorously, as "communists" (Hytner, 2015) and therefore regards as deviant from her personal (extremely conservative, Catholic-dominated) ethos. In this respect, and albeit in a caricaturesque manner, Miss Shepherd highlights Bennett's 'Otherness' within their allegedly 'liberal' neighbourhood. In the same way that the Crescent community tolerate Miss Shepherd's declassed position, they also accept Bennett's homosexuality; in both cases, however, this is done from a distance. In fact, the neighbours' detached respect does not prevent them from gossiping about his midlife bachelorship, as reflected when, in the dinner sequence at Bennet's home, and taking advantage of Bennett's absence at that moment, one of the neighbours says they "should find Alan a girlfriend" (Hytner, 2015). Even though, as a character, Bennett is not fully aware of this, the writer clearly plays with the similar or comparable forms of alterity that, like Miss Shepherd, also render him an outsider in the community. To quote from DeFalco again, his re-discovered form of Otherness within a context in which it should have been diffused prove that, indeed, "[f]amiliarity can return suddenly, forcefully, when one least expects it, an uncanny return of selfhood where the unafflicted were tempted to asume none existed any longer" (DeFalco, 2010, p. 83).

Besides enhancing their differences in terms of gender and sexuality, Bennett's prolonged relationship with Miss Shepherd over more than fifteen years intersects with the author's own process of aging as the middle-aged son of an older woman in decline. Within the memoir, short story and film, Bennett's approach to care and old age in his own middle age is as ambiguous as Miss Shepherd's own vision of the world from her cared after

position, from which she most of the time resists being helped or treated as a poor and disabled old woman. The presentation of Bennett's complex stance, including the duality he experiences as both character and teller of the same story, is conveyed in the film through the split character technique, whereby the author appears doubled and hence he often has conversations (mostly arguments) with himself. Bennett's dialogues with his alter ego frequently reflect his contradictions in relation to caring, many of which have to do with physical issues related to aging into fragility, or to the embodiment of decline itself. Whereas Bennett-the-carer constantly expresses his disgust towards Miss Shepherd's smell (a trait which is significant enough to open the memoir and the film's voiceover) and towards the shocking presence of her excrements in the driveway, Bennett-the-writer reminds him of his sense of duty and also expresses his compassion for the declining state of Miss Shepherd's body, particularly in the last years of her life, when she needs a wheelchair and is becoming incontinent. Interestingly enough, it is in the last part of the film, when both Miss Shepherd and Mr Bennett are a bit older, Miss Shepherd's health visibly weakens, and the visits from the new social worker become more frequent, that Bennett's alter-ego is made more present, and Bennett's own contradictions in relation to care and his relationship with Miss Shepherd are even more enhanced. In many ways, becoming the late-middle-aged carer of an older woman (at this point in her eighties) means confronting the reality of old age that is usually kept invisible within the community in which Bennett lives, where everybody else seems to be 'aging successfully.'

Ironically enough, the uncanniness produced by the physical, often portrayed as grotesque, signs of old age is also the point of encounter between Miss Shepherd and Mr Bennett as cared-after and carer. It is, in fact, within the eschatological terrain that Bennett, very subtly, recognises some kind of caring relationship between them, while at the same time confronting a different form of Otherness, namely, that of the abject aging body. In the short story, he states: "When she could still manage stairs she did very occasionally use my loo, but I didn't encourage it; it was here, on the threshold of the toilet, that my charity stopped short" (Bennett, 2015a, p. 17). Later, in the short story and film, Bennett acknowledges having to take care of Miss Shepherd's incontinence. Whereas in the short story, it is expressed in the following terms: "My method of retrieving these items [a stained incontinence pad] would not be unfamiliar at Sellafield. I don rubber gloves, put each hand inside a plastic bag as an additional protection, then, having swept the faecal artefacts together, gingerly pick them up and put them in the bin. 'Those aren't all my rubbish,' comes a voice from the van. 'Some of them blow in under the gate'" (2015a, p. 40), in the film, Bennett's dealing with his host's

faeces is shown through humorous sequences in which his cleaning of her excrements from his pathway and dustbin is edited against shots of Margaret enjoying herself at a funfair and eating ice-cream. These scenes actually emphasise the relationship between caring and dirt, an affirmation that Bennett emphasises in the film diary included in his short story collection: "Caring is about piss and shit…shit on AB's shoes when walking past the van, shit on the path when one of the bags Miss S. hurls out his the ground and bursts. And these are the most minor inconveniences" (2015a, p. xxiv). Drawing from Kristeva, DeFalco affirms that excrement is "at once unavoidably human and utterly other. The abject [which] exposes the fragility of the border between the 'I' and 'that which I am not'" (2010, p. 89). It is precisely through Bennett's dealing with Miss Shepherd's incontinence and faeces that Bennett is confronted to the kind of Otherness that comes with aging into frailty, as well as with his own responsibility as a son and as a citizen. Towards the end of the film, after another visit from the social worker, the writer still refuses to be called "the carer": "I hate the word, I hate the thought" (Hytner, 2015). However, in the next sequence, Bennett is the one who introduces the doctor to Miss Shepherd and who convinces her to go to the day centre for a couple of days to get washed and have hot meals.

On a different level, but closely related to these deeply felt ambivalences and the sense of uncanniness that old age provokes in him, Bennett takes the notion of duality further through the figure of his own aging mother, who is constantly set against Miss Shepherd's character and who, as Miss Shepherd, serves as a mirror to Bennett's own aging process and leads him to reflect on aging and care at a wider level. Throughout the film, several scenes depicting Bennett's brief but regular encounters with his mother are edited against sequences in which he is shown becoming closer to Miss Shepherd. The last time Miss Bennett visits him in London, he predicts she is "closer to be put in a home" (Hytner, 2015) than Miss Shepherd. A few sequences later, a scene in which Bennett explains that his mother has been put into a home, thereby displaying a "painful symmetry" between his mother and "her derelict counterpart," clearly establishes Miss Bennett as, ironically, Miss Shepherd's 'Other.' Like two sides of the same coin, to Bennett, both women project his own failure at two different levels: on the one hand, as the personal carer of his aging mother, according to the precepts of his culturally-inherited sense of filial duty; on the other hand, as the unofficial yet ultimate carer of a stranger, who not only replaces his aging mother in his own home, but also falls short of solving a situation that is highly complex at both personal and social levels. As he expresses it in the film: "putting my mother in a home, I see that as a kind of failure; and giving the other a home, that's a failure too" (Hytner, 2015). When a colleague at work asks

him about his "old lady" he actually gives account of both Miss Shepherd and her mother; whereas for Miss Shepherd he says "she's still there," he describes his mother as not being "all there" (Hytner, 2015). From Bennett's point of view, as expressed in the film, both women inhabit liminal spaces between sanity and insanity and have, in Bennett, the effect of questioning his own position within the aging process within both his personal and public domains. Through their own Otherness as ill and declassed older women, they allow him to recognize his own internal 'uncanniness,' that is, 'the Other-within' that will one day be an old man within a community that regards him as an outsider.

Conclusion

In their last conversation the evening before Miss Shepherd is found dead in her van, and as depicted in the film, Miss Shepherd and Mr Bennett hold hands for the first time. While doing so, both characters look at each other in silence, signifying with their gaze what they fail to express in words: through the filter of the actors' craft and Mr Hytner's direction, the viewer can envisage the sense of gratitude (in Miss Shepherd's case) and recognition (in Mr Bennett's) which so far they have been unwilling to grant to the other. This moment, which efficiently serves as a corollary of the 'familiar strangeness' and 'strange familiarity' of their relationship of care, is also a good illustration for our concluding remarks.

The examination of Alan Bennett's multi-textual narrative in the light of aging and care studies manages to set the focus on "the inevitability of dependence and responsibility" (DeFalco, 2014, p. 234) by highlighting the power of certain narratives of aging to depict characters who must confront their uncanny identity and respond to it "beyond […] comprehension, beyond recognition, because ethics is possible only beyond recognition" (p. 234), as DeFalco observes in the narratives of aging she analyses in her work. As shown in the memoir, short story and film, through his prolonged relationship with Miss Shepherd, Bennett confronts and responds to not only the paradoxes of caring, but also the identities that render him Other through such a relationship and in his own community: namely, those implied in his being an aging, male, homosexual carer. Following DeFalco's arguments, Bennett's portrayal of Miss Shepherd as an aging woman in intermittent and unsolicited need of care is the uncanny threshold to Mr Bennett's own self-knowledge, of which his own ethical insight is an important part. As has been shown, the writer does discover himself in the act of caring for and about Miss Shepherd, a discovery that is made evident through his writings. As he states by the end of film, "there is no such thing as marking time and time marks you. In accommodating her and accommodating to her I found twenty years of my life

have gone" (Hytner, 2015) and it is through his writing about Miss Shepherd that Bennett eventually finds himself both as a carer and as more mature person. Significantly enough, he stops talking to himself at the end of the film: through this reunification of his split duality, the viewer is invited to perceive the author's acceptance of his own aging self, as well as his own homosexual identity, which he has also learnt to display through his new lover.

The final focus of the cinematic narrative is not placed on Bennett, though, but on Miss Shepherd, which somehow diffuses the focus on Bennett's self-examination in order to let the viewer reach his/her own conclusions. Significantly enough, breaking with the realistic register of the entire text yet underlining the constant ironic touch of the screenplay, in the last scene in which Margaret appears against a chromatic representation of the Catholic Heaven, she is granted the "Ascension" (Hytner, 2015) that, as a devout of the Virgin Mary, and in line with her delirious fantasies of *grandeur*, she would have surely desired. In this way, through the humorous but empathic ending of Bennett's narrative, Miss Shepherd is presented as both a peculiar and yet truly remarkable person, whose story the writer needed to tell. If, as Kunow states, care "can serve as a magnifying glass of sorts which allows us to see clearly the position and also the value of non-normative forms of human life in a given society" (Kunow, 2015, p.333). Alan Bennett's "The Lady in the Van," in its various forms, throws light on the process of recognising the Other within the Self in alternative relationships of care. As Calasanti and Slevin (2006) state in their research on gender inequalities and aging, the same definition of care tends to be incomplete since, either as provided due to affection or as care work, it implies both physical and emotional demands as well as "emotional conflicts inherent in caring about" (179). Bennett's "The Lady in the Van" not only sets this complexity centre-stage, but also engages the audience at an emotional level. This involvement is possible thanks to the vivid representation of Miss Shepherd's magnetic personality at both textual and cinematic levels, and to the overt display of the author's own growth in his experience of care.

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