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## Empathy and End-of-life Care in Teri Szűcs's *Memory Has Come Back to Me* (2024)

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As a productive cultural metaphor, dementia points out the limitations implied by the notion of the human subject that has dominated Western culture's past and history since modernity, as well as the upcoming health-related, ethical, and economic challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The word dementia reflects this contested cultural heritage, as it is derived from the Latin terms *demens* or *de mentis*, which mean 'madness' or the 'lack of reason'. It is no coincidence, therefore, that many experts consider the term itself problematic and, in today's terms, misleading and pejorative. In Cohen's words, "[o]f the three great figures of mental anguish that might be said to haunt European thought before the nineteenth century—melancholy, lunacy, and dotage or senility—the first two become central to the reflexive accounting of modernity, whether refigured as alienation and anomie or violence, disorder, and possession." (4). The era of dementia seems to have dawned in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when "Charcot's early-twentieth-century heir, I. L. Nascher, the coiner of the term geriatrics, as a distinct form of knowledge

and practice, recognizes old age in general and mental debility in old age in particular as marginal sites within a reformulated clinic” (5). Then, in the second half of the century, also known as the “age of Alzheimer’s,” the “apparent total biologization of senility: internal disease processes become not only the necessary but also the sufficient ground of all reasoned conversation on the recognition of behavioral change in late life” (7). Dementia is still relatively young as a clinical category, but it is growing (up) extremely fast.

Of course, even before the current dementia boom, we can find many examples of such themes in literature and film, and especially in the light of the early dementia-themed works, certain key traditions and stereotypes of dementia representation emerge. The fears and stigmas associated with this condition still dominate the cultural narrative of the dementia: “the patient’s diminished capabilities, dependence and passivity are central to the cultural dementia narrative (i.e. how the condition’s nature and patient’s identity are perceived and understood in Western societies today); and this narrative has become core to beliefs about dementia in the wider cultural and societal discourse” (Zimmermann 2). For example, international films to date have depicted predominantly middle-class, white, heterosexual characters, and early examples, in particular, have been characterised by a predominance of mostly female patients: “there has been a tendency in the past for films to mainly portray women with dementia, and to focus on the memory loss element of dementia at the expense of other symptoms” (Strong 2021). This tendency reflects the reinforcement of a rather one-sided cultural narrative of dementia, where the symptoms are mainly cognitive and mnemonic decline, usually with spectacular cases of rapid memory loss. Another representational stereotype is the romanticisation of the disease within the family, often through the telling of melodramatic, tear-jerker stories, the most famous example of which is probably the unwaveringly popular film *The Notebook* (Nick Cassavetes, 2004).

*Memory Has Come Back to Me* is certainly a landmark in Hungarian dementia literature and in contemporary artistic representations of the crisis of care as well. On the one hand, the text fits into the thematic framework of international and Hungarian dementia narratives, which are growing at a symptomatic pace, and is explicitly diverse in terms of genre – alongside recent works such as Gergely Légrádi’s *Nélkülem, without you* (2020), István Kollár’s documentary *Alzheimer’s* (2020), Lilla Csabai’s poetry collection *Holt terek tükrei* (“Mirrors of Dead Spaces,” Minerva, 2021) or Zoltán Vámos’ above analyzed short feature film *The Dust of the Diamond Highways* (2022). On the other hand, it also represents a completely new direction in the memoir genre, in the form of a care narrative or care diary (perhaps we could call it

*caritatigraphy*), a counterpart to autopatography that has been on the rise since the 1960s, whose emergence can be clearly linked to the worsening of the crisis of care that is collectively affecting the welfare societies of the global North.

Despite the dense lyricism of the text, it presents the symptoms of dementia in a very objective way, and thus plays a very important educational and sensitizing role on the contemporary Hungarian literary-cultural palette. On the one hand, there are physical symptoms that require both physical and psychological attention from the caregiver. The narrator is well aware of what she has to do in this situation: “I know that I have to take care of the boundaries of her body” (11); at the same time, it is a natural human reaction to be sometimes angered and disgusted by the material reality of the situation: “What makes me angry and makes me forget everything is the dirt around the patient, which has to be constantly cleaned up, I can't stand it” (8), or when describing his mother, who sucks her own fingers compulsively: “This is, of course, a more sophisticated formulation of a tolerable level of disgust” (104). The portrayal of the materiality of the sick mother's body is one of the text's most courageous undertakings and its greatest strength, and the preservation of the human and feminine dignity of the increasingly vulnerable elderly mother is her daughter's primary concern – after bathing, for example, they cannot forget the drop of perfume her mother has just chosen. The narrator's hyper-sensitive observation of her mother's body makes her a good caretaker, a kind of detective work for the future: “I try to feel her wiring” (9), “I can tell by the way she holds her head if she is having a bowel movement.” Let us be honest here: these are scenes that everyone dreads – whether to accept or to give this kind of care to anyone at some point. Teri Szűcs's stripped-down, honest account, however, is able to relieve this anxiety by putting these situations into words, by naming the real stakes of a caring touch. For example, the realization that their physical intimacy is increasingly one-way, while the narrator is constantly touching his mother, in return she receives only more and more distant touches, as in the following night scene, when her mother is half-asleep and anxious: “And I realized there and then what it was like to be touched by a hand that does not know it is touching a body anymore, and that it is my mother's hand” (22).

The dichotomy between home and institutional care, in different but inhuman ways, and the grey zone between the two, the phenomenon of the home carer, is closely linked to the crisis of care and, especially in this country, to the phenomenon of care migration: “Given this degree of precarity, it would seem that anyone could do this job.” (127–128). The patriarchal, labyrinthine and often outrageously cynical system of institutional care is presented in this book

as the antithesis of the maternal model of informal, home-based care. Two extreme examples of this are the narrator's encounters with two psychiatrists: the first is “the well-regarded doctor from South-Eastern Hungary, a scumbag who sniffs out people with psychiatric problems, a subjective lyrical object” (73), who during the brief and impersonal consultation talks about his own holiday, stares at the breasts of the narrator's partner, and then “takes the envelope from my father for the treatment that sedated my mother into a catatonic state” (73). The other is the dementia specialist, a genuinely helpful but over-stressed psychiatrist, with whom the narrator can only talk for a full hour without interruption about her mother's condition and ask questions about it by going to the doctor's private clinic, where she is identified as a dementia patient at the reception (86). From this doctor, she finally learns that she probably always correctly thought that there was a link between her mother's uterine cancer, depression and then dementia, the “D labels” (77), and that “It seems that in Hungary the average survival of a dementia patient after diagnosis is one and a half years, in the United States it is five years” (92), also, further West from us there are even a “dementia-friendly theatres” (43).

Teri Szűcs' book, *Visszatért hozzám az emlékezet* (“Memory Has Come Back to Me”), is a memoir, a mother book and a care diary that provides a story, a language and an example for 21<sup>st</sup>-century Hungarian society of what it should face in terms of the spiritual, economic and moral dilemmas of home care and dementia.