

## The Fiction of Agelessness: Work, Leisure, and Aging in Alice Munro's "Pictures of the Ice"

Sara Jamieson

Volume 29, Number 1, Spring 2004

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc129\\_1art08](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc129_1art08)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Jamieson, S. (2004). The Fiction of Agelessness:: Work, Leisure, and Aging in Alice Munro's "Pictures of the Ice". *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 29(1), 106–126.

Article abstract

In contrast to a contemporary ideal of positive aging that positions the elderly as self-reliant consumers of leisure, Alice Munro's representation of old age introduces realities such as relative poverty, dependence, and physical decline that place this ideal beyond the reach of many retired people. "Pictures of the Ice" portrays photographs, mirrors, and acts of seeing to acknowledge and critique the influence of visual impressions over perceptions of the old in our image-obsessed culture. Although Munro's protagonist, Austin Cobbett, does not literally appear in the titular "pictures," his presence therein is sensed by those he leaves behind, who cannot perceive him in any but visual terms.

# The Fiction of Agelessness: Work, Leisure, and Aging in Alice Munro's "Pictures of the Ice"

SARA JAMIESON

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION of the life course has been and continues to be a rich source of narrative material for Alice Munro's writing. "Life course" is a relatively recent sociological term for the kind of plotting of the ideal shape of a human life that in fact has a very long history in Western thought. From antiquity, philosophers, theologians, and poets have repeatedly anatomized the life span, dividing it up into a series of stages, each with its appropriate behaviours and activities. The division of life into "Seven Ages of Man," for example, was already an old and familiar concept when Shakespeare included it in *As You Like It*. Munro's stories persistently explore the ways in which contemporary society confers adult status on women and men as they accomplish certain tasks like finding jobs, getting married, having children, and accumulating property. At the same time, Munro also draws attention to the relative lack of such markers of maturity in later life. As one character puts it, upon entry into middle age, "the progression got dimmer, and it was hard to be sure just when you had arrived at wherever it was you were going" ("Jakarta" 83). Here, Munro draws upon the ancient notion of life as a journey, and uses the language of travel (progression, arrival, destination) in an attempt to assign meaning to the temporal life span. Her Dante-esque evocation of mid-life as an entry into a dim region in which one becomes easily lost bears a marked similarity to the ways in which observers of contemporary Western culture speak of old age as an alien place, the negotiation of which depends on our possession of the right maps.<sup>1</sup>

Sociologists and historians of aging have linked this sense of disorientation to a recent shift from a modernist model of a life course whose stages are firmly fixed to a postmodern one in which the boundaries of adult life have become much less distinct. In *Ageing and Popular Culture*,

sociologist Andrew Blaikie observes that under modernity, the clear demarcation of successive life stages, such as education, employment, and retirement may have brought about definitive improvements to the material quality of later life, but it also functioned as a convenient means of social control. Recognition of the “existential price” of such rigidity “in terms of disaffection of the individual” has, he argues, brought us to “a postmodern impasse where neither lifelong socialisation to a series of socially approved goals, nor individualised departures from the script offer coherent guidelines for how we might collectively confront life-ending” (210).<sup>2</sup> Appearing in Munro’s 1990 collection *Friend of My Youth*, “Pictures of the Ice” explores some of the difficulties arising from shifting conceptions of the life course at the end of the twentieth century as it foregrounds what is arguably the most significant “signpost” of later life, and one whose meaning has altered considerably over the past two to three decades: retirement (Blaikie 26).

Whereas the early and middle decades of the twentieth century witnessed the institutionalization of retirement, “its closing decades reveal[ed] a growing fragmentation, both as regards the point at which people leave work and what they do with their time thereafter” (Blaikie 103). “Pictures of the Ice” is the story of Austin Cobbett, a former United Church minister in his seventies who has been “shifted out” of his job in a particularly galling fashion (142). As the founder of Turnaround House, a home for addicts in the town of Logan, Ontario, Austin converts alcoholic Brent Duprey to Christianity. “Bursting . . . out of Austin’s hold,” Brent becomes a hard-line fundamentalist whose charisma attracts a sizable portion of Austin’s congregation (145). Brent takes over Turnaround House, and the church replaces Austin with a new minister whom Brent can easily control. When the story opens, we see Austin preparing to relocate to Hawaii, where, he says, he will marry a rich widow and live a leisured existence by the sea. He buys new clothes for the warm climate, and shows pictures of his bride-to-be and her home to his housekeeper, Karin, Brent’s ex-wife. It is Karin who discovers, but does not reveal to anyone, that the story of Austin’s upcoming marriage is a lie. He has instead accepted a job as a minister in Shaft Lake, a Northern Ontario community, where he intends to “wear himself out, quick, quick, on people as thankless as possible, thankless as Brent” (154). Austin apparently drowns in Shaft Lake soon after his arrival there.

Caterina Ricciardi has argued that “Pictures of the Ice” is a story about “the passage from an old to a new order. To his great regret, Austin has to give way to the new minister, the new church, the new man-

ager of the temperance house, the new people, the new generation" (126). If we read the story from an age-studies perspective, however, we must ask what this means for Austin. What is he left with following the loss of his professional identity? If he must indeed "give way," why should his fate be so harsh? In my reading, I will pursue these questions by situating the story within the context of model retirement lifestyles circulating in consumer culture. Exposing contradictions between a cultural prejudice toward leisure and the idea of retirement as a period of socially sanctioned non-work, Austin's story can be read as a critique of a society that has difficulty imagining a viable role for the elderly other than the consumption of lifestyles requiring a certain level of affluence and health. In contrast to a contemporary ideal of positive aging, which accentuates the self-reliant pursuit of pleasure and personal fulfillment, Munro's representation of old age introduces realities such as relative poverty and physical decline that place this ideal beyond the reach of many retired people.

The significance of my emphasis on the difficulties that can accompany the aging process comes into sharper focus when set alongside a 1998 essay by Peggy Martin. Examining Munro's representations of middle-aged women, Martin argues that Munro's insistence on the materiality of aging female bodies constitutes a profound resistance to social hierarchies that value women according to their youthful beauty and fertility. With its emphasis on the importance of "positive representations" (92) of middle age, Martin's paper is part of a body of criticism dedicated to theorizing optimistic narratives of midlife that affirm growth and renewal as important aspects of the aging process over and against a dominant cultural narrative that associates aging with loss, decrepitude, and death. A prominent example of this kind of approach is Margaret Morganroth Gullette's identification of the "midlife progress novel" as a genre that interrogates and rewrites a standard realist plot that links maturity with disillusionment and reinforces a pessimistic association of aging with decline (xviii). This work performs the important task of separating the category of middle age from that of old age, with which it is all too often associated in Western culture.<sup>3</sup> With my reading of "Pictures of the Ice," however, I want to suggest how analysis of aging in Munro's work becomes more complicated when the focus is shifted from midlife to late life.

Martin's argument that Munro "revalues" middle-aged bodies in a "radical departure from all the negative connotations" of aging (83, 84) cannot be applied to all those bodies in Munro's work that occupy a much more highly bounded space than middle age. Think of the charac-

ter of Aunt Madge in "Winter Wind," who lives in a nursing home, "lives on and on, unrecognizable, unrecognizing, completely divested of herself, dried up like a little monkey, past all memory and maybe past bewilderment, free" (194). Nursing homes appear regularly throughout Munro's stories as places where her characters are often disturbed by what they see: Rose in "Spelling" responds with mixed emotions (revulsion, wonder, despair) to a "diapered" old woman who strains to spell out words uttered by those around her (183); in "Lichen," the gerontophobic David can cope with visits to his father-in-law only by thinking of the old man as "a post-human development" (304); most recently, Grant, in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," makes regular visits to his institutionalized wife, who appears not to recognize him. While the decline of Austin Cobbett in "Pictures of the Ice" is not this far advanced, it has affected him to an extent that makes it difficult to discuss his old age in exclusively positive terms. Munro's representation of Austin's body is in fact highly ambiguous: while it insists on the reality of decline in old age, it does not reduce Austin's story to one of decline alone. Paying attention to the multigenerational perspectives that the story subtly employs reveals how readings of the aging body in decline are often produced by particular (younger) subject positions. The responses of younger characters to the *look* of Austin's aging body expose the negative consequences of looking old in an image-obsessed culture, and reveal the limitations of visual perception in apprehending the complex experience of *being* old. It is in the context of the predominance, within consumer culture, of technologies of visual representation such as photography, that I will finally consider the gerontological significance of the titular "Pictures of the Ice." These pictures, in which Austin paradoxically does and does not appear, suggest his entrapment within a culture where he must mask the visible signs of his aging or risk becoming invisible. Despite the array of choices ostensibly available to him, Austin has difficulty forging an identity for himself in old age that is separate from the expectations of consumer culture.

Since the psychiatrist Robert Butler coined the term "ageism" in 1968 to refer to what he saw as "a deep and profound prejudice against the elderly" in American culture, there has been a widespread effort to combat negative stereotypes of aging, and work like Martin's and Gullette's exemplifies this continuing trend (11). A story like "Pictures of the Ice," however, alerts us to how too narrow a focus on a positive imagery of aging can in fact be complicit with the kind of negative imagery it purports to resist. Historian Thomas Cole argues that the phenomena of ageism and anti-ageism, with their attendant negative and

positive imagery, are in fact products of the same cultural matrix, namely, the rise of industrial capitalism in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, hand in hand with a bourgeois morality of strict control over the body. Recoiling from the failure of control that the aging body in decline represents, Victorian culture produced a “dualistic vision” of old age, splitting it into “sin, decay, and dependence on the one hand; virtue, self-reliance, and health on the other” (123). Cole argues that this dualistic view of old age has operated in Western culture ever since: the Victorian insistence that a healthy and independent old age was accessible to anyone through hard work and self-discipline gradually gave way under scientific evidence of the inevitable degeneration of aging tissues, and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the negative pole of the duality was becoming dominant. Emphasis on the deterioration associated with aging provided the rationale for mandatory retirement as a means of shifting older people out of the workforce in order to maximize productivity.<sup>4</sup> Demands for social insurance throughout the early decades of the twentieth century similarly depended on a conception of older people as needy and infirm (Cole 127). In contemporary culture, the dualism survives in the division of the general category of “old age” into two distinct phases: terms like the “young old” and the “third age” denote a positive mythology of older people as healthy, active, and affluent, while negative aspects of aging such as dependence and disease are the preserve of the “old old,” or the “fourth age.”<sup>5</sup>

The new ideal of positive aging is nowhere more visible than in contemporary representations of retirement. Social gerontologists have traced a shift in the popular imagery of retirement since the 1970s from a period of “sickness and decline” to one of “health, liberation, and ‘refurbishment’” (Blaikie 73). This shift in imagery has been directly tied to the emergence of consumer culture. As businesses have become increasingly sensitive to the possibility of a lucrative grey market, older people are enjoined to construct their identities and reject ageist stereotypes through the consumption of goods and services: they are “encouraged not just to dress ‘young’ and look youthful, but to exercise, have sex, diet, take holidays and socialize in ways indistinguishable from those of their children’s generation” (Blaikie 73-74).<sup>6</sup> Although more hedonistic than the Victorian ideal of a vigorous, abstemious old age, this modern ideal of positive aging is, as Cole points out, fueled by “the same drive for accumulation of individual health and wealth, the same preoccupation with control of the body that gave rise to ageism in the nineteenth century,” and is, in fact, no more tolerant of the inevitable difficulties of aging than the nega-

tive stereotypes it seeks to abolish (129). In looking critically at contemporary models of positive aging, I do not mean to suggest that the pursuit of personal fulfillment in later life ought not to be cherished. As Mike Hepworth argues, consumer culture is “a complex and ambiguous social process” and one which, for some, “brings a freedom of choice unparalleled in the history of society” (20). It is important, however, not to lose sight of discrepancies between the ideal of a leisured and active retirement lifestyle, and the lived experience of retired persons. What the business world calls the grey market is not synonymous with older people in general but instead refers to “a small, privileged sector of that age group with money to spend” (Sawchuk 182). Blaikie contends that the majority of older people are “neither affluent nor infirm, but both poor and relatively fit and well” (77). Indeed, this could be a description of Austin Cobbett, who lives on the income of the “Old Age Pension and [his] minister’s pension,” copes with a certain amount of physical frailty, and who cannot live up to the various styles of positive aging that he encounters (148). Austin’s own commitment to bourgeois values of individualism and self-reliance makes it difficult for him to admit the possibility of having to depend, at least partially, on others for support. His story exposes the difficulty of envisioning meaningful identities for the elderly that are substantially different from those on offer within a contemporary market economy of production and consumption.<sup>7</sup>

The opening scene of the story makes explicit the connections between the dream of an “age-irrelevant society” and the promises of consumer culture (Cole 129):

Three weeks before he died — drowned in a boating accident in a lake whose name nobody had heard him mention — Austin Cobbett stood deep in the clasp of a three-way mirror in Crawford’s Men’s Wear, in Logan, looking at himself in a burgundy sports shirt and a pair of cream, brown, and burgundy plaid pants. Both permanent press.

“Listen to me,” Jerry Crawford said to him. “With the darker shirt and the lighter pants you can’t go wrong. It’s youthful.”

Austin cackled. “Did you ever hear that expression ‘mutton dressed as lamb?’”

“Referred to ladies,” Jerry said. “Anyway, it’s all changed now. There’s no old men’s clothes, no old ladies’ clothes anymore. Style applies to everybody.” (137)

“Style” may be the “key word” with which consumer culture con-

trives to erase the signs of aging, but as the scene progresses, those signs forcefully assert themselves (Blaikie 102). Following the death of his wife and the loss of his post at the United Church, the narrator informs us, Austin “had lost weight, his muscles had shrunk, he was getting the pot-bellied caved-in shape of an old man. His neck was corded and his nose lengthened and his cheeks drooping” (137-8). Here, Jerry Crawford’s hopeful rhetoric of agelessness comes up against what appear to be undeniable marks of physical decline that cannot be covered up with supposedly youthful outfits. Austin’s permanent press clothing suggests a certain banality to consumer culture’s promises of permanent youthfulness. Similarly, the “postcard picture” that Austin shows to Karin of the Hawaiian town where he says he is going to live is a conspicuously mass-produced image of paradise:

The town’s main street has a row of palm trees down the middle, it has low white or pinkish buildings, lamp-posts with brimming flower baskets, and over all a sky of deep turquoise in which the town’s name — a Hawaiian name there is no hope of pronouncing or remembering — is written in flowing letters like silk ribbon. (140)

Written in highly decorative script, the name of the unnamed Hawaiian town introduces a play of presence and absence that hints at what might be repressed — decline, death — within the postcard image’s silken promise of luxury. The postcard echoes another absent name, that of the lake that Austin drowns in, a lake “whose name nobody had heard him mention.” Both of these names point to that which lies concealed within consumer culture fantasies of agelessness. Munro’s placement of information about Austin’s drowning in the very first line of the story draws attention to the scene of salesmanship that follows it as a strenuous attempt to deny old-age realities of decline and death.

In this story, the vision of an active yet leisured retirement lifestyle in a warm climate is quite literally a fiction. Using costumes and bits of narrative detail that come easily to hand, Austin manipulates a popular conception of retirement to construct a scenario that is convincing to those around him because it is so utterly conventional: among other things, he says he intends to take up golf and join a play-reading club (146). As Héliane Ventura observes, “the image in the mirror that Austin offers the community in Logan is the image of their expectations in terms of retirement . . . and the community is taken in precisely because of the attraction to similarity and the pleasure in imitation” (76). Indeed, the town’s response to Austin’s act of storytelling exemplifies that “pleas-



ure of recognition” that makes the experience of reading Munro’s stories so rewarding; like Munro herself, Austin has the ability to combine details in the creation of a fiction that seems uncannily “real” (Redekop 3). For his part, Austin’s pleasure lies in deceiving his audience; Karin thinks she can sense his enjoyment in “slipping out from under,” in “fooling all of them into thinking he’s changed his spots” (154). The deception that Austin successfully perpetrates is not only pleasurable, but also empowering. He leaves his car and all the contents of his house to Brent, the man who betrayed him, in a show of generosity that enables him to salvage some dignity out of his humiliation. He converts his failure into success by creating the illusion that he is about to exchange a life of defeat and loneliness for one of companionship and ease.

In a society that positions the elderly as consumers of leisure, Austin’s apparent determination to keep working by taking on a new post in Shaft Lake seems like a rejection of the imperatives of consumer culture, an attempt to live out his old age according to a different set of values. When Karin learns of his plan to move to Shaft Lake, it seems to her an act more in keeping with his character than moving to Hawaii: “How can anybody believe,” she wonders to herself, “that this tottery old man, whose body looks to be shrivelling day by day, is on his way to marry a comforting widow and spend his days from now on walking on a sunny beach? It isn’t in him to do such a thing, ever” (154). Karin’s reading of Austin’s removal to Shaft Lake as an act in accordance with his true nature has been pursued by critics as well. Ventura, like Karin, reads the scenario of second marriage in Hawaii as something that would be “out of character” for Austin, and accepts as “fact” his intention to “wear himself out” on “thankless” people in Northern Ontario (74). Ajay Heble warns readers of the story to “mistrust, to be suspicious of, anything which uncritically presents itself as true or objective” (181-82), yet his own reading of Austin’s Hawaii fiction as something that “mask[s] his grief” and “conceals” his essential “loneliness” implies that the Shaft Lake narrative is somehow a more authentic expression of Austin’s selfhood (181). Heble is right in warning us to be mistrustful, but it seems to me that reading the Hawaii story as the fiction that acts as a smokescreen for the truth, for what really happened, does not pursue the implications of this warning far enough. If we bring Heble’s insistence on suspicion to bear upon Austin’s sojourn in Shaft Lake, the episode appears less an expression of his true self than as a revelation of the extent to which his notions of selfhood are shaped by prevailing cultural attitudes toward old age. While Austin’s escape to Shaft Lake under the guise of going to Hawaii may

seem like a rejection of the materialistic values of consumer culture, it in fact suggests his difficulty in constructing an identity that is separate from those values. In contrast to a critical preoccupation with the difference between the paradisaic implications of the Hawaii seaside and the “god-forsaken” iciness of Shaft Lake, I am intrigued by what they share in common (Ventura 74; Ricciardi 125). The vision of retirement in Hawaii represents a contemporary ideal of positive aging from which decline has been erased: learning to play golf and reading plays, Austin is presumably going to expand his horizons and continue his education, while enjoying a fulfilling sex life with his new bride. The vision of Austin living in a trailer in a cold climate, however, working among thankless people, similarly shows little respect for what Cole terms “the intractable vicissitudes of aging” (129). The visions of old age associated with Hawaii and Shaft Lake respectively can both be read as products of a culture that has difficulty accommodating those vicissitudes. Between extremes of self-indulgence and selflessness, Austin cannot seem to imagine any middle ground where he could find fulfillment while at the same time acknowledging the losses and difficulties that are a part of his aging self.

The search for late-life identities more satisfying than those on offer in the marketplace often leads into the realms of religion and spirituality, art and literature, but in Munro’s story, such searching does not necessarily end very far from where it starts. Cole suggests that in pre-capitalist American cultures, religion fostered the construction of “a dialectical view of old age,” one that emphasized “*both* the inevitable losses and decline of aging *and* hope for life and redemption” (120). New England Puritans, for example, found in the infirmity of the old a moral lesson about human frailty and dependence upon divine grace. While this did not mean that the elderly were necessarily treated with an unusual degree of kindness or respect, it at least offered believers “an alternative to despair” (Cole 120). Austin Cobbett is a United Church minister, but he seems to find very little in the way of spiritual consolation in his old age. Perhaps this is to be expected, since the United Church, as it appears in Munro’s fiction, is not generally associated with the life of the spirit, but instead embodies bourgeois values of utility and materialism. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, for example, it is singled out as “the most prosperous church in Jubilee,” where “doctors, lawyers, merchants [pass] the plate” beneath stained-glass windows depicting Christ “performing useful miracles” (93, 95). The young Del Jordan instinctively feels she must go elsewhere if she is to experience any apprehension of divinity. In “Pictures of the Ice,” the United Church’s salient feature is its carefulness with

money: it is prosperous enough to build for Austin's replacement a new house "with a patio and a double garage" (139), and its members spend much time "haggling" over how much he should be paid (137). We are told that "Austin rarely mentions God" (142). At the conversion of Brent, he qualifies Brent's conviction that he has "been put in touch with God," suggesting instead that he has "been put in touch with the fullness of his own life and the power of his innermost self" (144). Brent seduces a sizable portion of Austin's congregation with "nightlong sessions of praying and singing and groaning and confessing" (141) that seem to offer a more ecstatic alternative to Austin's "quiet persuading talking" (145). Significantly, Turnaround House, the "project close to [Austin's] heart," enables the transformation of addicts into responsible, productive members of society, fueled, presumably, by belief in the power of the individual will (148). Offering his services to a needy congregation in Shaft Lake, Austin ostensibly chooses to end his life in service to others, thereby constructing an identity for himself that is separate from the self-gratifying imperatives of consumer culture. At the same time, however, the story questions the extent to which this is possible for him by drawing attention to how his work is and always has been deeply entangled with consumer culture's materialistic values.

While Austin's religion thus appears to be of limited value in helping him cope with the difficulties of aging, the story also explores the extent to which literature, specifically Arthurian romance, might offer a model for growing old that is more inclusive than the "positive" models promoted by consumer culture. After Austin's daughter phones from Montreal, expressing concern about his emotional well-being, he attributes her distress to a dislike of change, and complacently quotes from "The Passing of Arthur," the last of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. "The old order changeth," he says to Karin, "yielding place to new" (149). This much-quoted line does more than simply indicate Austin's ministerial, rather inscrutable habit of speaking in well-worn expressions and platitudes. In Tennyson's poem it is spoken by the mortally wounded Arthur, just before the death barge bears him away to Avalon (line 408). Like his bequest of the money from the sale of his possessions to Brent, Austin's speaking in the voice of King Arthur is something that perhaps enables him, at least in his own mind, to turn around a humiliating situation, this time by framing his own departure from Logan in heroic terms. To pursue the connection between Austin and Arthur a little further, just as Arthur's face is "white / And colorless, and like the withered moon / Smote by the fresh beam of the springing east" (lines 380-82), Austin's

face is also distinguished by its fragile pallor: Karin notices that even when “he’s just in from the cold, he’s white. Put a candle behind his face, it’d shine through as if he were wax or thin china” (154). While Karin most likely does not recognize Austin’s Arthurian resemblance at this moment, it seems to suggest a narratorial sympathy with his desire to appear in his old age as something more than a purchaser of permanent press pants. Austin’s ghostly translucency appears to set him apart from the materialism of consumer culture, yet it also reduces him to the level of “his wife’s dishes” and all the other objects being emptied out of his house to be sold after he is gone (141). Austin’s appeal to Arthurian legend may seem like an attempt to transcend the materialistic values of his own time, until we recognize the extent to which Tennyson’s retelling of the legend is itself implicated in those values. Tennyson scholars have insisted that Victorian readers did not turn to the *Idylls* in order to escape the negative effects of a burgeoning industrial capitalist society, but instead found in them the expression of their highest hopes for that society. John D. Rosenberg, for example, argues that the Victorian “medieval revival, of which Arthurianism was a part, was not so much an attempt to escape the hard new world of industrial capitalism as a radical attempt to reform it” (149). Tennyson depicts an industrious Arthur who is “always working,” and who mirrors the high value placed upon work in Victorian culture, acting as a model for middle-class masculinity (Mancoff 270). Austin’s predicament exemplifies Cole’s thesis that the contemporary ideal of positive aging is but the latest manifestation of a deep-seated cultural prejudice against bodily decline and dependency that has its roots in the nineteenth century. A continuing belief in the moral value of work can be discerned in the way in which the contemporary ideal of retirement strives to legitimate itself through a so-called “‘busy ethic,’ emphasizing leisure that is earnest, active, and occupied” (Blaikie 104). Whether Austin lives an activity-filled existence in Hawaii, or keeps working in harsh conditions well into his seventies, both of these alternatives require him to overcome or ignore his evident bodily frailty.

The connection between Austin and King Arthur eventually breaks down when his boat founders and he drowns, or at any rate, disappears (at the end of the story his body has yet to be recovered). Ricciardi observes that the intertextual references at play in this story do more than simply broaden the narrative frame of reference; they also reveal their inadequacy at reconciling the tensions and contrasts that they introduce (132). As King Lear found to his cost, kingship and retirement are not concepts that are easily reconciled. This conflict points to a glaring dis-

junction between Austin and the Arthurian intertext, one that draws attention to the lack, within a culture that valorizes paid labour, of narratives for retirement that might enable Austin to acknowledge his need for the support of others younger than himself without letting himself be defined solely by his dependency. If “narrative[s] of pilgrimage or quest” like the story of King Arthur have traditionally performed a communal function of affirming links between generations, between past, present, and future, its collapse here suggests the weakening of such connections in a society increasingly segmented into discrete “lifestyle enclaves” (Blaikie 174). Jerry Crawford’s claim that “style applies to everybody” seems to herald the narrowing of generation gaps through shared interests, preferences, and modes of self-expression. While the postmodern blurring of boundaries between various life stages might be expected to result in an increasingly “age-integrated” society, Blaikie identifies a paradox whereby age segregation has in some ways become more pronounced, for example, in the growth and promotion of retirement communities that “explicitly reflect a desire to live separately from younger people” (177). In Munro’s story, Austin’s dealings with his son Don and his daughter Megan are indicative of how the postmodern culture of positive aging, and the high value it places upon self-reliance, might contribute to the erosion of intergenerational relationships. Both children have pursued careers that have taken them far from Logan, and, in the story, Austin’s only show of approval is reserved for their financial independence. “You and your sister are providing well for yourselves” he tells Don: “I’m very fortunate in my children” (148). It is curious that, despite Megan’s and Don’s prosperity, at no point does anyone raise the possibility that Austin might turn to them for some kind of support, whether financial or emotional. Austin’s commitment to an ideal of independent living appears so complete that he is unable to admit any need for assistance. In this light, we have to consider the possibility that the “boating accident” that may have killed him is no accident at all, but has been as thoroughly planned as the rest of his deception. It is possible that his apparent intention to continue his career in Shaft Lake is as much a fiction as the tale of his Hawaiian marriage: both scenarios stress health, vitality, and independence, and, as such, neither one is possible for him. When suicide emerges as the only acceptable alternative to, or as the ultimate expression of, independence in old age, Munro’s critique of “positive aging” appears severe indeed.

Having chosen not to salvage anything for themselves from their father’s house, Austin’s children nonetheless receive some pictures that he

took shortly before his departure. These are the pictures of the ice that has formed as lake water, driven up on shore by a winter storm, has frozen into a “crazy landscape,” transforming fences and playground equipment into “shapes ... that might be people, animals, angels, monsters” (151). After Austin leaves, the pictures fall to Karin, who thinks as she looks at them that “she should have taken the camera and captured Austin — who has vanished ... as completely as the ice” (155). She looks at them “so often,” however, “that she gets the feeling that he is in them, after all” (155). Finally, in a cryptic gesture, she mails one each to Megan and Don, and one to Brent, without enclosing any kind of explanatory note. Austin’s absent presence in these photographs is connected to one of the central themes of the story, namely, the extent to which we value visual perception as a supposedly objective means of apprehending reality, in spite of all the ways our eyes can be deceived. Think of how Austin uses photographs and postcards to make the story of his Hawaii marriage seem authentic, apparently taking for granted that nobody will question his pictorial “evidence.” This kind of simultaneous foregrounding and destabilization of the supposed objectivity of visual perception is a pre-occupation throughout Munro’s body of work, but I am interested in how photographs, mirrors, and acts of seeing in this particular story work specifically to question the ways in which we look at the old.

Indeed, looking at the old is an activity that has itself come under considerable scrutiny in recent gerontological discourse. Haim Hazan, for example, is critical of the “ocularcentric gaze of the sociology of ageing,” which, in a well-meaning attempt to correct the so-called social “invisibility” of the elderly, inadvertently reinforces “specular stereotypes” that reduce old age to its visible physiological attributes, thus effectively silencing older voices (26-27). In its privileging of sight over sound, contemporary sociology reflects the image obsession of consumer culture which “focus[es] attention on superficial appearances” (Blaikie 182). The characters in “Pictures of the Ice” display traces of this obsession, often appearing fixated on the look of Austin’s aging body. Karin observes a “downward slide” that is “noticeable on him everywhere — face slipping down into neck wattles, chest emptied out and mounded into that abrupt, queer little belly. The flow has left dry channels, deep lines” (146). Here, decline is literally inscribed on Austin’s face and body. In connection with the opening scene in Crawford’s *Men’s Wear*, I argued that Munro’s emphasis on the appearance of bodily decline is part of a strategy of making visible certain realities that are repressed within contemporary ideals of positive aging. At the same time, however, Munro deploys

visual details in such a way as to acknowledge the reality of decline, without reducing the story of Austin's old age to one of decline alone. If we look again at the scene in the men's wear store, still keeping in mind Heble's warning to be skeptical of everything in this story that presents itself as straightforwardly descriptive, it becomes clear that the visible marks of aging on Austin's body are not as definitive as they may at first appear, but are instead inflected by multiple perspectives within the text. Reading this scene, we are invited to look at an old man who looks at himself in a three-way mirror while he is in turn looked at by two younger men. The ensuing description of Austin's appearance is aligned with the narrative perspective of Jerry Crawford, who sees in Austin's "corded" neck and "caved-in shape" an opportunity to "talk him into a neckscarf ... and ... pullover" (137). Jerry's private opinion that "Austin needed all the cover-up he could get" is not simply motivated by the hope of making further sales; his impulse to cover up Austin's body may also be read as an act of displaced aggression, an attempt on the part of a younger man to distance himself from his own future old age, which the body of an older man presents to him. I am influenced here by Kathleen Woodward's psychoanalytic reading of Virginia Woolf's *The Years*, in which the middle-aged character North "resists identification" with his elderly relatives by mentally denigrating their bodies (78). As for the other man, Phil Stadelman, his failure to recognize Austin in his new clothes, "though Austin was his own former minister," can be interpreted as a defensive reaction to the uncanny manifestation of a future that he fears (138). By placing this description of Austin's body within the context of these multiple perspectives, Munro raises the question of the extent to which the physical marks of age are produced by the anxieties of younger characters and cannot finally be accorded the status of objective fact.

We are not told exactly how old these two men are, but one thing that distinguishes them from Austin is that they are still employed while Austin is "officially retired" (137). The ideology of retirement assumes that the cessation of paid work is a natural solution to the "problem" that as we age we necessarily become less capable, less adaptable, less productive. Munro's story mounts a challenge to that ideology: Austin does not have to retire because he is no longer capable of doing his job; rather, it is retirement itself that appears to precipitate his physical decline. For his part, however, Austin reinforces the ideological assumptions underlying retirement. As we have seen, he speaks in the voice of the dying King Arthur and thereby equates retirement with death, naturalizing what Jeff Hearn identifies as a cultural construction of old men as "redundant, even

invisible, not just in terms of paid work and family responsibilities, but more importantly, in terms of life itself" (101). Traditionally, of course, age has been a source of power for men, particularly in pre-industrial societies. Retirement, however, offers an example of how, under modernity, older men's relationship to power became more diversified and more complex (Hearn 102).<sup>8</sup> As for the two men who watch as Austin tries on his retirement outfits, notice the extent to which their workplaces define them: Jerry Crawford works in a store that bears his own name; Phil is introduced as "Phil Stadelman from the Toronto Dominion Bank" (138). Their responses to Austin's appearance and behaviour in this scene speak volumes about retirement as a crisis of masculine identity.

The exchange between the three men occurs, significantly, in a men's wear store, a place where the outward appearance of manliness is assembled. Jerry cannot stop Phil from telling "his AIDS joke": "Why did the Newfie put condoms on his ears? Because he didn't want to get hearing aids" (138).<sup>9</sup> The joke raises a host of anxieties about possible threats to a heterosexual male, middle-aged identity, as its bid for laughter comes not only at the expense of Newfoundlanders, but also of homosexuals and wearers of hearing aids, devices often associated with the old. Another threat to this identity is indicated by the curiously feminine behaviour that Austin, at times, exhibits in this scene. Such behaviour suggests anxieties about retirement as the end of work outside the home, a life passage that can bring about a diminished social status, as, in short, a potentially "feminizing" experience. This anxiety is not necessarily brought on by retirement alone, but by the aging process in general: as David Jackson comments in *Unmasking Masculinity*, the prospect or experience of "physical breakdown" in old age is "terrifying ... for many men because it connects the masculine body with weakness, dependency and passivity — all the supposedly 'feminine' qualities they have spent a lifetime defining and defending themselves against" (68-69). Austin's laughter takes the form of a "cackle," a word that is etymologically feminine. According to the *OED*, it has been associated primarily with hens and female birds. When Austin applies to himself the phrase "mutton dressed as lamb," Jerry corrects him, saying that it is meant to refer "to ladies." Disturbingly feminine associations to mutton and cackling hens are further displaced when the narrator, again in a way that seems to reflect Jerry's point of view, describes Austin instead as "a stringy old rooster — stringy but tough" (138). This equally unflattering epithet locates a reassuring toughness in Austin's apparent frailty. The description of Austin as "game enough to gear up for a second marriage" (138) brings to the



fore the epithalamic undertones latent in this parodic scene of decking the bridegroom (in coordinating separates) amidst off-colour jokes and unspoken comparisons to cocks. Such comparisons enable the middle-aged men in the scene to fend off thoughts of the distressing possibility of declining sexual prowess in old age by summoning the stereotype of the libidinous old man. In this way, the story once again exposes the ways in which the visible, physiological manifestations of Austin's old age are tinged by the anxieties of younger characters.

In front of the mirror in the men's wear store, the marks of age on Austin's body are made visible, but what is not visible, on reading the story for the first time, is that his upcoming marriage is in fact an elaborate hoax. Initially, Jerry Crawford seems to be the one in control of the situation, attempting to profit from cultural anxieties about the aging body by selling layer upon layer of clothing to cover it up. Jerry remarks that Austin's pants "are going to have to be taken in" to fit his shrunken frame, but it is Jerry himself who is taken in, as Austin successfully perpetrates a deception upon his family and (almost) all of his friends and acquaintances (138). Once we get to the end of the story, we are called upon to re-evaluate our initial impressions of this entire scene and Austin's behaviour in it. Munro's narrative emphasis on deception and surprise thus furnishes her with a way of writing about old age that acknowledges the power of visual impressions in our image-obsessed culture, but at the same time manages to destabilize that power. Right from the beginning, the image of Austin standing "deep in the clasp of [the] three-way mirror" introduces a play of depth and surface that alerts us to pay attention to that which lies beneath outward appearances (137).

The story ends with another act of looking at Austin, one that is even more complex and ambiguous: a woman looks at photographs in which the old man does not literally appear, but in which, nonetheless, she feels that she can discern his presence. Even though the "pale, lumpy ice monstrosities" in the pictures bear an intriguing resemblance to Austin's body as it has been described, with its pallor and wrinkles and protruding belly, Austin's presence here evokes in Karin something other than anxiety about her own aging (155). Instead, the pictures seem to reaffirm a moment of intergenerational understanding between two people who have experienced profound loss: Austin has lost his wife and his professional identity, while Karin is haunted by her failure to get her infant son to hospital in time to prevent his death from meningitis. Karin, who by chance intercepts a phone call from Shaft Lake when Austin is out of the house, is the only person in Logan who knows

where he is really going. Looking at the pictures after Austin's disappearance,

she thinks now that he knew. Right at the last he knew that she'd caught on to him, she understood what he was up to. No matter how alone you are, and how tricky and determined, don't you need one person to know? She could be the one for him, and that was a link beyond the usual. Every time she thinks of it, she feels approved of — a most unexpected thing. (155)

Karin knows that if she were to tell others about what Austin really plans to do, "somebody might stop him going" (154). Her silence is undeniably self-serving: if Austin does not leave, it will not be so easy for her to confiscate certain items from his house, like a "willow-pattern plate" and "a white damask cloth," that she has had her eye on (149). From another perspective, however, Karin's self-serving negligence appears like generosity. She is, after all, letting Austin exercise control over his own life at a time when others would be all too ready to deny him this. She sees determination where others might see dementia. Hazan observes a tendency on the part of care-givers to "[formulate] the condition of the old in medically intelligible terms," with the result that "any information produced by an old person about herself or himself and the world, unless congruous with the construction of reality of the non-old, is liable to be discredited," pathologized under terms like "disorientation" and "senility" (25). Here, Karin displays a willingness to credit Austin's scheme as a deliberate choice, rather than the act of someone who has, in Megan's words, "flipped his *wig*" (148).

While Austin may escape from the psychiatric gaze beneath which his daughter would place him, the story is less optimistic about the extent to which he can subvert the "scopic regime" of consumer culture and its mythology of positive aging (Hazan 26). Earlier in this essay I argued that it is difficult to read Austin's removal to Shaft Lake as an outright rejection of the retirement lifestyle represented by the Hawaii narrative, since the narrative of the man who refuses to retire is equally bound up with a contemporary ideal of aging which does not admit the possibility of decline. Ultimately, the pictures of the ice help to underscore how difficult it is for Austin to live out his old age in a manner different from that which his culture expects from him. For Ventura, the pictures are distinguished by an "ethereal radiance" that differentiates them from the "substantiality" and "materialism" (80) of the other objects that Karin has "inherited" from Austin's house. I would point out that, as mysterious

and otherworldly as they are, they are also just as much a part of the material world as any of those other objects. In Karin's last conversation with Austin, it is their temporal existence, their economic value that is stressed: they are not ready in time for his departure, so he arranges for her to pick them up, leaving her the money to pay for them (154). As Heble notes, Austin's "subjectivity is encoded in [these pictures]" (182), but it is encoded in a manner that registers its unintelligibility in the context of a visually-oriented consumer culture in which "you're only as old as you look." The difficulty of constructing a subjectivity that is separate from such a culture produces the paradox that although Austin is literally invisible, he is still somehow contained within the parameters of a photograph, where Karin cannot perceive his presence in other than visual terms. The pictures express the dilemma of the elderly within an "ocularcentric" society where the only alternative to social and political "invisibility" is a condition of "over-visibility" whereby "the old in fact exist only as long as they are being seen" (Hazan 26-27). Unable either to disguise the marks of his aging or acknowledge that he has any need for support from others, Austin simply "vanish[es]"; unable to live up to a contemporary ideal of positive aging, he appears as a "blank" within Karin's field of vision, inhabiting a space connected to all that the ideal endeavours to erase (155).

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

I thank the Killam Trusts for their support of this research. I also thank Cecily Devereux for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, the title of Peter Laslett's important 1989 study of new ways of thinking about the life course that emerged in late twentieth-century Britain, *A Fresh Map of Life*, seems to speak to a general sense of being lost amidst changing expectations for later life.

<sup>2</sup> While both Blaikie and Laslett focus primarily on changing definitions of late life in contemporary Britain, both draw as well upon American, and, in Blaikie's case, Canadian sources. Laslett states that the changes he documents in Britain are also observable in the histories of "most other Western countries," including Canada (79).

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Woodward points to physical changes such as menopause and the appearance of grey hair as phenomena that occur in middle age yet are read as signs of old age,

and constitute areas “in which old age must clearly be decoupled from biological change” (202 n. 17).

<sup>4</sup> William C. Cockerham argues that a perception of older workers as slower, less adaptable, and more resistant to change than younger ones, which developed in the period between 1920 and 1940 along with a managerial emphasis on speed and efficiency in manufacturing, still persists, despite scientific evidence that discredits generalizations about age and reduced performance. See 152-53.

<sup>5</sup> The terms “young old” and “old old” were introduced in a 1974 essay in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. See Neugarten. The term “the third age” originated with the founding of *Les Universités du Troisième Âge* in France in the 1970s, and passed into English usage with the founding of the University of the Third Age at Cambridge in 1981. See Laslett 3. The University of the Third Age (UA3) is a non-profit organization that aims to enrich the quality of later life through activities such as interactive seminars and fitness instruction.

<sup>6</sup> See also Featherstone and Hepworth’s analysis of how the British retirement magazine *Choice* has evolved since the late 1970s into “the vehicle for the promotion of the benefits of an active positive lifestyle where the consumption of goods and services has an integral role to play in the battle against ageism” (40).

<sup>7</sup> In my reading of Austin’s encounter with a consumer culture that encourages him to construct his identity through the purchase of lifestyle accoutrements (such as clothing) marketed to seniors, I am influenced by Robert Lecker’s reading of Munro’s story “Carried Away” as a meditation on “a postindustrial fall that is identified with the commodification of all forms of human activity, a fall that reduces meaning (and being) to the level of what can be produced and sold” (103).

<sup>8</sup> Even as he calls into question the traditional equation of age, masculinity, and power, Hearn acknowledges that, in general, men are better off financially in retirement and old age than women, who tend to live longer and have less access to occupational pension plans. While it is difficult to read Austin Cobbett as an especially powerful figure, his Arthurian reference might be interpreted as a nostalgic appeal to what Hearn calls the cultural script of the “aging king,” which speaks of the pathos of the aging, respectable man whose individual loss of power refuels the structural power of men (109).

<sup>9</sup> As Hazan comments, verbal cues such as “repetitious locutions” and “adherence to maxims and aphorisms” are often stereotypically associated with old people and are read as signs of senility (25). Just as Austin’s frequent recourse to proverbial sayings probably owes more to his training as a preacher than to his age, the middle-aged Phil Stadelman’s repetitious telling of “his AIDS joke” is an example of a supposedly elderly mode of speaking that cannot be attributed to old age. Another example of how Munro’s story destabilizes entrenched assumptions about old age is Brent’s membership on “the O.T. (over thirty, old-timers) hockey team” (143). These multiple names throw the youth/age binary into question and remind us that the adjective “old” has no absolute meaning but must constantly be renegotiated in different contexts.

## WORKS CITED

- Blaikie, Andrew. *Ageing and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.  
 Butler, Robert. *Why Survive?: Being Old in America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

- Cockerham, William C. *This Aging Society*. 2nd Ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997.
- Cole, Thomas R. "The 'Enlightened' View of Aging: Victorian Morality in a New Key." *What Does It Mean to Grow Old?: Reflections From the Humanities*. Ed. Thomas R. Cole and Sally Gadow. Durham: Duke UP, 1986. 117-30.
- Featherstone, Mike, and Andrew Wernick, eds. *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Featherstone, Mike, and Mike Hepworth. "Images of Positive Aging: A Case Study of *Retirement Choice* Magazine." Featherstone and Wernick 29-47.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Safe At Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel: Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, Anne Tyler, and John Updike*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
- Hazan, Haim. *From First Principles: An Experiment in Ageing*. Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 1996.
- Hearn, Jeff. "Imaging the Aging of Men." Featherstone and Wernick 97-115.
- Heble, Ajay. *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994.
- Hepworth, Mike. "Consumer Culture and Social Gerontology." *Education and Ageing* 11:1 (1996): 19-30.
- Jackson, David. *Unmasking Masculinity. A Critical Autobiography*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1990.
- Laslett, Peter. *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*. London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1989.
- Lecker, Robert. "Machines, Readers, Gardens: Alice Munro's 'Carried Away'." *The Rest of the Story: Critical Essays on Alice Munro*. Ed. Robert Thacker. Toronto: ECW, 1999. 103-27.
- Mancoff, Debra N. "To Take Excalibur: King Arthur and the Construction of Victorian Manhood." *King Arthur: A Casebook*. Ed. Donald Kennedy. New York: Garland, 1996. 257-80.
- Martin, Peggy. "'What A Pathetic Old Tart': Alice Munro's Older Women." *ESC* 24 (1998): 83-92.
- Munro, Alice. "Jakarta." *The Love of A Good Woman*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998. 79-116.
- . "Lichen." *Selected Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1996. 289-307.
- . *Lives of Girls and Women*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971.
- . "Pictures of the Ice." *Friend of My Youth*. Toronto: Penguin, 1995. 137-55.
- . "Spelling." *Who Do You Think You Are?* Toronto: Macmillan, 1978. 174-88.
- . "The Bear Came Over the Mountain." *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001. 274-322.
- . "Winter Wind." *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974. 192-206.
- Neugarten, Bernice L. "Age Groups in American Society and the Rise of the Young-Old." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 415 (1974): 187-98.
- Redekop, Magdalene. *Mothers and Other Clowns: The Stories of Alice Munro*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Ricciardi, Caterina. "The Secrets of Intertextuality: Alice Munro's 'Pictures of the Ice.'" *Open Letter* 11.9/12.1 (2004): 121-36.
- Rosenberg, John D. "Tennyson and the Passing of Arthur." *Victorian Poetry* 25(3-4) (1987): 141-50.

- Sawchuk, Kimberly Anne. "From Gloom to Boom: Age, Identity and Target Marketing." Featherstone and Wernick 173-87.
- Tennyson, Alfred. "The Passing of Arthur." *Idylls of the King. The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 7th. ed. New York: Norton, 2000. 1293-303.
- Ventura, Héliane. "The Ordinary as Subterfuge: Alice Munro's 'Pictures of the Ice.'" *Journal of the Short Story in English* 38 (2002): 73-85.
- Woodward, Kathleen. *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.