

No Nation but Adaptation

“The Bear Came over the Mountain,” *Away from Her*, and What It Means to Be Faithful

How would Canadian literary criticism have developed differently if Margaret Atwood had titled her 1972 study of Canadian literature not *Survival* but *Adaptation*? It seems easy enough to imagine a tweaking of her premises to accommodate such a shift. One might even see adaptation as already implicitly valued in her description of the fourth, most successful “victim position” she identifies in the nation’s writing: namely, that of the “creative non-victim,” someone who does not merely fall prey to her or his surroundings but responds to them in positive ways (38). If Atwood had undertaken her survey of Canadian literature with adaptation in mind, she might have found it to be just as pervasive a theme as survival. Given how recently she had produced her own adaptive text, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, it is tempting to think that adaptation was just too close to her nose for her to see it.

Rather than conducting an overview of Canadian literature from the perspective of adaptation, I wish to address two texts, Alice Munro’s story “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” and its filmic adaptation *Away from Her*, which provide rich material for an initial attempt. The story, first published in *The New Yorker* in 1999 and then collected in Munro’s 2001 book *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, follows an Ontarian married couple, Fiona and Grant, as they deal first with Fiona’s development of what appears to be Alzheimer’s disease and then with her entrance into the assisted living centre Meadowlake. Concomitantly, they confront the mutually remembered but seldom discussed matter of Grant’s past adulteries. As a result, in this text there is a relationship between memory, fidelity,

and adaptation, and it is a complex one. Taken as a story about an intimate relationship between two people, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” offers insights into how notions of fidelity can adapt to changing conditions.

Meanwhile, these insights have only grown more complicated in the course of being filmed as *Away from Her* by the Canadian actor Sarah Polley. The motion picture was Polley’s feature debut as screenwriter and director, and it has been an international success, earning Oscar nominations for lead female actor Julie Christie and for Polley’s adapted screenplay. But if *Away from Her* is an acclaimed adaptation, it is also a text *about* adaptation and, by extension, about artistic adaptation. Taking up the themes of Munro’s story, the film cannot help but draw the audience’s attention to the similar role of memory and fidelity in the process of cinematic adaptation. Not least, in its departures from Munro’s story, *Away from Her* demonstrates that an adapter such as Polley might feel an unease around issues of faithfulness. Harold Bloom identifies in poets an “anxiety of influence” as they attempt to join a tradition of poetry by departing from their predecessors’ work. In the case of adaptation, this anxiety is perhaps even more vexed, given that the line of influence is unavoidably clear and some manner of fidelity seems to be expected. Accordingly, if one considers *Away from Her* in conjunction with Polley’s paratextual comments about her relationship to Munro’s story, it becomes evident that an anxiety can emerge from an artist’s ambivalence about the possible symbolic roles—as genealogical legatee or as erotic partner—that an adaptation might occupy in relation to its source text. At the same time, *Away from Her* demonstrates further that this ambivalence is imbricated with adaptation’s place in the formation and understanding of national culture. Discussing fidelity’s place in adaptation studies, Thomas Leitch asserts that instead of worrying about why adaptations always seem so unfaithful, critics would do better asking: “Why does this particular adaptation aim to be faithful?” (127). With regard to *Away from Her*, one answer lies in the phantasmatic interpersonal ties that exist between artists; another, related response involves a communal endeavour to consolidate a Canadian artistic tradition.

Fidelity and Meta-Adaptation

“Fidelity” has been a fraught term in adaptation studies. Critics such as Robert Stam (56) and Linda Hutcheon (7) have argued that its use hinders critical discourse by placing adaptations in a subservient relation to the texts they adapt. While I share Stam’s and Hutcheon’s scepticism about the

usefulness of fidelity as an aesthetic value, I wish to consider its place as a felt imperative in the processes of artistic production and reception. In doing so I take my cue from Munro's and Polley's texts, which explore the very question of what it means to be faithful. One might think it mere coincidence that issues of fidelity similar to those besetting Fiona and Grant in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" also arise for adaptive artists such as Polley, and certainly it would be implausible to treat Munro's story as an intentionally proleptic allegory about the process of the text's own transformation on screen. What is more, Polley's film is hardly so explicit in its meta-adaptive aspects as, say, Spike Jonze's highly self-reflexive 2002 movie *Adaptation*. Nevertheless, among the departures that *Away from Her* makes from Munro's story are ones that speak to their own adaptive infidelities and to the challenges of artistic adaptation more broadly. In particular, the relationship between Fiona and Grant provides a model for the relationship that an adapter such as Polley has with her source text, so that whether intentionally meta-adaptive or not, the treatment of the couple in *Away from Her* might be taken to express something about an adapter's own desires and anxieties.

"The Bear Came Over the Mountain" prepares the way for thinking about such a possibility by problematizing the notion of fidelity. The complications begin when Fiona enters Meadowlake and Grant must abide by the institution's policy prohibiting visitors for the first month so that new residents can adapt to their surroundings. During that month, Fiona adapts all too well for Grant's comfort. She forgets her attachment to him and develops a fondness for another resident, Aubrey, who has been stricken by a virus that left him mostly mute and in a wheelchair. Without any memory of her relationship to Grant, Fiona has lost her faithfulness. Although Grant is jealous and persistently watchful over her and Aubrey, he seems to adapt to this change and does not chastise her for her changed allegiance. His own loyalty undergoes a further test when Aubrey is removed from Meadowlake by his wife Marian, leaving Fiona heartbroken. In response, Grant seeks out Marian and implores her to allow Aubrey to visit Fiona, thus proving his own fidelity to Fiona by facilitating her "infidelity" to him. His ability to transform from jealous husband to procurer of romance for Fiona aligns adaptation with love and sets the ground for the affect-laden conception of artistic adaptation that Polley presents in discussing *Away from Her*. Meanwhile, the notion that fidelity and romantic non-monogamy need not always be opposed is further underscored when, having initially failed to convince Marian of his case, Grant unintentionally draws her sexual interest and an invitation to a dance.

Munro's story leaves a lacuna before its final scene in which Grant presents Aubrey to Fiona, but readers are not discouraged from presuming that at the very least Grant has played on Marian's attraction in order to gain her permission with regard to Aubrey's visit.

In that light, Grant's own possible adultery is folded into the project of seeking Fiona's well-being, so that in the story, adaptation and infidelity seem to go hand in hand as activities necessary for happiness. As a matter of fact, Grant contrasts adaptation with survival in particular, deciding that although Marian is "[g]ood at survival" (317), it is her focus on preserving her own material welfare that makes her slow to appreciate and cooperate with his "fine, generous schemes" (*Hateship* 316). In "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," then, survival is linked to self-interest, adaptation to altruism and affection. At the same time, though, Munro tinges Grant's generosity with a whiff of egoism, as when he privately enters into a

not-entirely-indifferent appraisal of Marian's physical attributes. Consequently, his claim to be pursuing "fine, generous schemes" carries a certain irony. Indeed, the phrase echoes another story by Munro, "Material," in which a writer uses his former neighbour as the model for a character in a story, exhibiting what his ex-wife calls, with both praise and disdain, a "fine and lucky benevolence." (*Something* 35)

In contrast, *Away from Her* downplays any initial attraction to Marian on Grant's part. Concurrently, Polley fills in Munro's lacuna with a sequence in which Grant and Marian enter a sexual relationship. At first he appears to be accepting it merely for the sake of winning her acquiescence to Aubrey visiting Fiona, which Marian herself suggests by saying to Grant: "It would be easier for me if you could pretend a little." In the next scene, though, the two of them lie in bed in a post-coital euphoria. It would seem Grant has accepted not just the necessity of sexual infidelity, but the fact that he may enjoy sex with Marian free of guilt. Indeed, the final scene of *Away from Her*, in which Fiona and Grant express their devotion to one another, implies that their relationship has been anything but compromised by his relations with Marian. The film thus presents the idea that in certain circumstances, marital fidelity may *require* sexual non-monogamy. Polley's choice to depart from Munro's story in order to explore this dramatic and moral territory is striking, especially given the lack of an obvious narratological necessity for her to have filled in the gap. However, if the sequence is approached as self-reflexive and meta-adaptive, then it could be construed as an attempt allegorically to legitimize the film's own potential "infidelities" to Munro's text, even while the sequence is itself a departure from Munro's text and thus a further

infidelity. Read in this way, the meta-adaptive upshot of Grant's satisfying sex with Marian is that artists such as Polley can also—and perhaps must—depart from conventional notions of fidelity when adapting texts, not merely for their own pleasure, but for the sake of honouring the source texts by attempting to match their aesthetic standards. Moreover, if it is true, as René Girard argues, that fictional narratives work in part by presenting the desires of characters whom the audience seeks to emulate, then for viewers of *Away from Her* who have also read “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” this sequence in the film provides a model by which they might liberate themselves from their own strict loyalty to Munro's text (5).

Those audience members familiar with Munro's story may see themselves reflected especially in Grant, whose shift from a dyadic intimacy with Fiona to the observation of her life at Meadowlake parallels their own move from the private, individual intimacy of reading to spectatorship in the communal setting of the cinema. In that light, another of the film's scenes not found in Munro's text also seems meta-adaptive: namely, when Grant lingers downstairs at Meadowlake after saying goodbye to Fiona on the day of her admission and is handed a note from her via the supervisor that reads “GO NOW. I LOVE YOU. GO NOW.” At this moment of paired departures—Grant's from Fiona, the film's from Munro's story—Polley introduces a text written on paper, as though to remind viewers that *Away from Her* has its roots in words, and in words written by a woman not so different in age from Fiona. Meta-adaptively, then, one might read Fiona's adjuration and declaration of affection as also imputed to Munro's text, if not to Alice Munro herself, telling viewers and filmmaker alike not to feel beholden to the story. Through the proxy of Fiona, the film stages a phantasmatic moment of authorial blessing, one that hearkens back to an actual, pre-cinematic moment in which Munro signed away the film rights to her text. By positioning viewers with Grant as licensed leavers and justified adulterers, *Away from Her* encourages them not just to accept adaptation's infidelities, but to embrace the notion of the necessity certain infidelities within the parameters of a broader loyalty to the original text. Indeed, this concomitant fidelity and infidelity is encapsulated performatively by the film's title, which replaces Munro's with a phrase that appears in her story, thus both suggesting loyalty and enacting another movement “away from her.” Similarly, in a preface Polley wrote for a movie tie-in edition of Munro's story, she acknowledges that she will not escape accusations of transgressive infidelity, even though she declares: “I painstakingly honored the story that I loved” (xiii). At this juncture Polley almost

explicitly draws a parallel between marital and adaptive fidelity, given that on the previous page she also describes Fiona and Grant as “two people who have and are in various ways failing each other and simultaneously doing everything they can” (xii). By depicting herself as similarly striving and possibly failing in the eyes of some, Polley aligns herself with Munro’s characters, as though to caution her audience once more that inevitably the most faithful adaptations commit adultery.

Lover or Legatee

Sarah Polley was twenty-seven-years-old when *Away from Her* premiered at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival, and so she was adapting not only across media but across generations, retelling the story of a retired couple that had first been published when Munro was sixty-eight. Insofar as the process of artistic adaptation can be phantasmatically interpersonal—that is, the adapter’s sense of fidelity may extend to the source text’s author as well as to the text—and in view of the difference between Polley’s and Munro’s ages, it would not be surprising if Polley, writing and directing her first feature film, were to position herself not as the equal of such a celebrated author but as a kind of apprentice. One might even expect in *Away from Her* to find Polley aligning herself with the story’s younger characters and with her audience as the legatee and beneficiary of Munro’s text. In that case, *Away from Her* would be a film that bridges the space between an older generation—represented by Munro as well as by Fiona and Grant, not to mention by Julie Christie and Gordon Pinsent in the roles of the two characters—and the future of the artistic culture, the hopes for which might seem to be embodied in young artists such as Polley. In order to take up such a position, though, Polley has to work against a story that is remarkably resistant to such a futurist logic. Children are virtually nowhere to be found in “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” and because Fiona and Grant are not parents, the story offers no consolation in the glimpse of a younger generation’s possibilities, no catharsis through a child or grandchild coming to grips with Fiona’s institutionalization, no redemption through the passing on of memory. Any hope lies in the future of Fiona and Grant themselves.

This aspect of Munro’s text has notable ramifications for Polley and her film. For instance, as though responding to a concern that the story’s lack of young characters might limit her personal traction in the narrative—not to mention younger viewers’ interest in the film—Polley adds a short scene between Grant and a young woman visiting Meadowlake, a character who

seems to echo the feelings that Polley claims to have experienced while visiting her own grandmother at a care facility. In her preface to Munro's story, Polley says she was worried that she would leave the place "with a depression hanging over me" (xiv); likewise, in *Away from Her* the young woman calls Meadowlake "fucking depressing." In an interview, Polley has acknowledged of the character: "That's sort of me, as someone half the age of these people, looking up to these people: not quite understanding how they got there, being in awe of them, being curious about them" (qtd. in Horn). Her awe in the face of these characters mirrors the admiration for Munro and Christie that she also articulates in the interview, thus cementing the notion that interpersonal affect in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is connected to lines of affect involved in adapting the story.

Meanwhile, a deleted scene included on the DVD of *Away from Her* suggests an ambivalence in the film with regard to what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism." This is an ideological position that equates the production of children with hopes for the future. In its choice of scapegoats for society's perceived failings, it points the finger at people who do not have or privilege offspring. It is a position that embraces the following logic: "If . . . there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself" (13, original emphases). Although the lack of young characters in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" seems to signal a rejection of reproductive futurism, the story defers to that position for a moment when Grant refers to a long-past "discovery that [Fiona] was not likely to have children. Something about her tubes being blocked, or twisted" (*Hateship* 278). This moment in the narrative conventionalizes the couple, so that Munro's story becomes aligned with numerous other texts—from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* to W.H. Auden's poem "Miss Gee"—in which a character's childlessness symbolizes, foreshadows, or literally produces psychological and physiological problems. In contrast, Polley's ultimate choice to remove the scene from her film means that in *Away from Her* Grant and Fiona's childlessness is left unexplained. In fact, it is only through the lack of references to any children that viewers can assume the characters are childless in the first place. This indeterminacy opens the door to a less conservative reproductive politics. However, Polley reintroduces reproductive futurism to the film by adding a different scene. In it, Fiona

emerges from a doctor's appointment where her symptoms of Alzheimer's disease have become clear. Seeing a woman with an infant, she comments to Grant: "What an ugly baby!" The moment seems intended to illustrate the intransigence of Alzheimer's by showing Fiona to have forgotten social protocols, a common sign of the disease. But why make the point through an encounter with a baby in particular? On the one hand, the scene threatens to expose reproductive futurism as a collusive, even coercive fantasy, in which one is expected to provide a mother and infant with only admiration and affirmation, even while one recognizes privately that not every baby is really beautiful. On the other hand, the scene verges on endorsing reproductive futurism by associating the pathology of Alzheimer's with the putative "pathology" that would lead someone to talk of an infant with anything but praise.

The anxiety that this scene seems to express around reproductive politics is tied to questions about the sexual symbolics of artistic adaptation. With regard to these questions, the film manifests further ambivalence about its relationship to Munro's text. Is adaptation a passive, filial act of devotion, with the adaptive narrative deferentially taking up the mantle of its textual parent, or is it something active, sexual, and even potentially violent? Insofar as it may be both, it risks being doubly transgressive, breaking both Oedipal taboos by engaging in erotic relations with the parental text and then "killing" it by transforming and supplanting it. Polley's own ambivalent stance is evident in her preface, where in one breath she claims that "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" helped her to deal with her grandmother's aging and death, and then in another she credits the story with helping her to gain the maturity necessary for marrying the editor of *Away from Her*, David Wharnsby. These two interpersonal relationships shade into Polley's relationship with Munro's story. In one moment, Polley takes up the posture of a young person learning from an older one's text, as when she claims that "one day, a while ago now, it held my hand and led me to a place that I am very, very grateful to be" (xvi). In another moment, even while further developing this passive persona, Polley construes her relationship to Munro's story as sexual and violent: she says it "crept right into me, [and] had its way with me" (vii); later she says that the text "seemed to enter like a bullet" (ix). The motif of violence recurs when she asserts that her romantic life had involved "one unstable, destructive relationship after another," allowing readers to associate her relationship to the story with her erotic interpersonal ones (ix).

This oscillation between legatee and lover is not surprising, given an adapter's twin imperatives to be faithful and to stand on her own as an artist,

engaging as an equal with another's work. Because "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" has no young characters and thus limits the models of desire that it offers, it might seem to encourage would-be adapters and other readers to engage with it erotically rather than filially, not as children but as fellow spouses and adulterers. In contrast, the filial model of adaptation allows adapters to propagate the conceit that they are passive and loyal, merely transformed by the text rather than transforming it in turn. In one interview, Polley has in fact granted herself a more active but still filial role, claiming that as she sought to enlist Munro's and Christie's help in bringing "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" to the screen, she felt as though she were acting out a transferential relationship in the wake of losing her own mother. In Polley's words, "I was chasing these maternal figures around the world, begging them to be a part of my life" (qtd. in Horn). Although such a characterization admits Polley as agential, her taking up the symbolic position of a child means that she need not foreground her significant reconstitutions of Munro's text, nor does she need to acknowledge the ways in which she may have affected how the source itself is read and marketed. Nevertheless, the film's effect on the life of Munro's story is evident from the movie tie-in versions of "The Bear Came Over the Mountain." Not least, the Canadian edition retitles the story after the film, moving the newly rechristened "Away from Her" from the back of the collection in which it appeared to the front and re-titling the collection itself *Away from Her*.

The discourse of filial adaptation is unlikely to recognize such reciprocity of influence, substituting for it the trope of a genealogical chain that heads forward, away from the source narrative and the site of infidelity, toward as-yet-unborn future texts of which the current adaptation is merely one, not transgressive but normatively reproductive, contributing to the fecundity of culture as a whole, and authorized to do so by the parental text. In this light, it makes sense that Polley writes about her marriage to Wharansby as though it were a triumph of Munro's story. This paratextual narrative construes "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" not as troubling to reproductive futurism but in fact as participating in it, functioning as a kind of elder matchmaker that, by bringing together Polley and Wharansby, ensures the repro-normative future signified by their wedding. By cutting the scene in which Grant reveals Fiona's inability to have children, Polley's text might seem more radical than Munro's, insofar as it unmoors the characters' childlessness from the reassuringly conventional device of an unwanted biological defect. However, the cut also has the effect of leaving Grant and Fiona—and

by extension, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”—fertile and generative, so that Polley, Wharnsby, and their film can become the story’s figurative progeny, and the characters are finally given the children they never had.

Remembering Canada

Insofar as adapters must navigate between the perceived aesthetic trespasses of remaining too faithful to the original text—e.g., as when a film relies heavily on voice-over—and straying too far from it, adaptation has an analogue in discussions of national literary cultures such as Canada’s, where by turns artists are excoriated for appearing either incestuously too endogamous (drawing accusations of parochialism, clique formation, and government-funded degeneracy) or traitorously too exogamous (drawing accusations of pandering to bigger markets, abandoning the nation by living abroad, or betraying it by not writing about it at all). As though anticipating just such lines of critique, *Away from Her* attempts to occupy a harmonious space between these hazards. For instance, although it features two international stars in Julie Christie and Olympia Dukakis, *Away from Her* is a film replete with markers of Canadianness not found in Munro’s text: references to Canadian Tire and the Ontario hamlet of Tobermory, Brant County road signs, a filing cabinet magnet with the national flag on it, and glimpses of a televised Toronto Maple Leafs game. Polley even displays a concern for accent, accommodating the distinctive voice of the American actor Dukakis in the role of Marian by making the character American, too, and having her draw attention to the fact, telling Grant in a telephone message: “You probably recognized the voice—the accent.” Meanwhile, the British actor Christie gamely changes her accent to play Fiona, even pronouncing the word “out” in a recognizably Canadian way. Given that *Away from Her* is a text in a medium that has usually been thought to require the revenues associated with American audiences in order to flourish, the question of why the film should add Canadian content is worth consideration.

In fact, the requirements of the American market are a challenge that Munro herself has faced, perhaps most notoriously in the case of her 1978 story collection, published in Canada as *Who Do You Think You Are?* but as *The Beggar Maid* in the US because the publisher claimed that an American audience would not understand the double meaning of the former title. Judith Thompson remarks of a similar problem in writing for the stage:

I think that all of us as Canadian playwrights, as we write and hope for productions across the US, we unconsciously or semi-consciously adapt our own work

and often remove—or have a conversation with ourselves about removing—specific cultural references, Canadian references. . . . And yet I feel I'm betraying where I live, who I am, what this country is becoming, if I do erase those references. (qtd. in Clarke, et al. 51)

Such an observation might prompt an examination of how Munro, who regularly publishes her stories first in *The New Yorker*, might be required to “adapt” her own work for an American audience on an ongoing basis. However, *Away from Her* is a film strikingly bent on *not* betraying Canada. Not only does it retell a Canadian author's story without effacing its Canadian setting or local details, but it is also rife with national literary, cinematic, and musical intertexts, so much so that it effectively names its own Canadian artistic heritage. In that sense, Polley's legatee-lover relationship to Munro's text is mirrored by her legatee-lover relationship to Canadian culture more broadly.

Away from Her posits for itself an ideal artistic commonwealth that aims to be neither too endogamous nor too exogamous, one that emerges through the use of Canadian and international intertexts not found in Munro's story. For example, the nurse Kristy reads to Aubrey from Alistair MacLeod's novel *No Great Mischiefs*, while Grant reads to Fiona from Michael Ondaatje's poem “The Cinnamon Peeler,” and later from W.H. Auden and Louis MacNiece's *Letters from Iceland*. Indeed, a passage he reads aloud from Auden's poem “Death's Echo”—one which urges the reader to “*dance while you can*” (153)—implicitly licenses Grant to dance with Marian both literally and figuratively soon afterwards. The admixture of such literature suggests it is being offered as a cynosure of emotional articulacy and of cultural value. In contrast, Fiona asserts that she and Grant do not watch movies anymore, now that they are confronted by “all those multiplexes showing the same American garbage.” The line is assuredly not in Munro's story. Rather, it is a self-reflexive joke by which the film both distinguishes itself from other movies and acknowledges the lesser cultural prestige of film in general when compared to literature; as Stam remarks, there is a common belief in “the axiomatic superiority of literary art to film” (58). Hutcheon points out that because of this perceived hierarchy, cinematic adapters might think that “one way to gain respectability or increase cultural capital is for an adaptation to be upwardly mobile” (91). Insofar as *Away from Her* allows literary intertexts to function periodically as its voice, substituting readings from them for original or adapted dialogue, the film seems to embrace the hierarchy of art forms, attempting to gain credibility for itself by incorporating literature,

even as it subordinates itself to literature in the act of doing so. In that regard the film becomes further identified with the child, the figure who takes up the novitiate's position in the family hierarchy but who gains authority with age even while obeying the imperative to respect its elders.

In this cultural family, Canadian texts are particularly prominent, and they are not exclusively literary: aside from the passages from Ondaatje and MacLeod, the film features music by k.d. lang and Neil Young. The film's use of Canadian settings and intertexts goes far beyond what the content rules of governmental funding bodies might require. Moreover, the film was hardly obliged by promotional interests, the details of Munro's story, or the demands of verisimilitude to be as explicitly Canadian as it is. Instead, the film seems intent on honouring what it declares to be its national cultural context. Atom Egoyan's 1997 film *The Sweet Hereafter*—in which Polley starred—provides arguably the most obvious template for the kind of movie that Polley has made: it also adapts a literary text while using Canadian music, a wintry Canadian landscape, and a predominantly Canadian cast. On the website for *Away from Her*, Egoyan—who served as an executive producer for the film—is quoted as saying: “I was aware, on *The Sweet Hereafter*, that Sarah was watching everything very closely.” In that sense, Polley is not merely adapting Munro's text but adapting Egoyan's approach to Canadian filmmaking. Meanwhile, near the end of *Away from Her* there is a shot in which the camera circles Fiona and Grant while they embrace. Here Polley offers another Canadian filmic intertext. Don McKellar's 1998 film *Last Night*, which was also set in Canada and in which Polley also acted, concludes with a similar shot that spins around two characters as they kiss. By paying homage to and by incorporating into itself the work of established Canadian artists who personally have participated in Polley's artistic coming of age, *Away from Her* does its part in building the artistic prestige and commercial viability of a still-developing tradition of mainstream films by and about Canadians.

The promotional tagline for *Away from Her* was “It's never too late to become what you might have been,” a line that in the film Kristy claims to have seen on a billboard outside a United Church in Brantford. In the context of the narrative, the line's exhortation for people to undertake a process of transformation seems to allude to Grant's development into a properly faithful husband. At the same time, the line may be read as a celebration of adaptation in general. What is more, given Polley's choice to associate the line with such a specifically Canadian site as a United Church in Brantford,

it might be taken as speaking not least about the importance of Canadian adaptation. This importance has not been lost on other commentators. For instance, the political scientist Jennifer Welsh answers the question “What is a Canadian?” with a single word, “adaptable,” and she goes on to note a range of national adaptive practices, from the pioneers’ process of adjustment and the range of clothing Canadians must wear in facing the variable climate, to the country’s development of “middle power” status during the Cold War (251-54). Meanwhile, the relevance of adaptation to Canadian literature in particular might be read into Hutcheon’s recent book, *A Theory of Adaptation*. Hutcheon does not focus primarily on Canadian texts, but she does adapt her own previous work on parody by defining adaptation in the same way as “repetition with variation” (4), and by calling parody “an ironic subset of adaptation” (170). In that light, if one were to revisit—and adapt—her earlier thesis in *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988) that Canadian art has a particularly ironic, parodic character, one might say that the nation’s art is also characterized by adaptation.

As it stands, though, adaptation remains an under-explored topos of Canadian literature, both as a theme and as a practice. In this essay, I have suggested various ways in which it might gain a more prominent place in the discussion of Canadian literature, ways suggested by the meta-adaptive aspects of “The Bear Came over the Mountain” and *Away from Her*. In particular, the case of Polley’s film speaks to the significance of adaptation for a country in which many artists and critics have been preoccupied with building a sense of a national cultural heritage. If I have also paid close attention to the psychodynamics of adaptation, I have done so to encourage further discussion about how the interpersonal character of adaptive creation can become manifest, and how it might be connected to nationalist artistic undertakings: how, for instance, an adaptive artist might consider herself to be both a text’s and a country’s legatee. From that perspective, one might view Canadian literature as an ongoing process not merely of survival, but of adaptation in order to find and maintain a voice in evolving North American and global literary contexts. To adapt the words of Derek Walcott, one might even say that Canadian literature has no nation but adaptation.¹ Indeed, *pace* those such as George Grant or more recent commentators who have declared or forecast the death of Canada, the study of adaptation in Canadian literature might help to change the terms of debate, asking not whether the country will survive but how it continues to do so.²

NOTES

- 1 In Walcott's poem "The Schooner *Flight*" his speaker Shabine declares: "I had no nation now but the imagination" (350).
- 2 For example, see Lansing Lamont's *The Coming End of Canada and the Stakes for America* (New York: Norton, 1994) or Mel Hurtig's *The Vanishing Country: Is It Too Late to Save Canada?* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003).

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